The Blessing of Failure

Shabbat Sermon - Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

It took 57 minutes for Amanda Anisimova to lose the Wimbledon final.

Fifty-seven painful, unrelenting, crushing minutes: 6-0, 6-0. A loss so decisive that tennis doesn't even have a word for it. But in just five more minutes—five minutes of breath, vulnerability, and grace—she reframed that failure and offered the world something far more important than a victory.

She wiped tears from her cheeks. She thanked the fans. She praised her opponent. And she honored her mother. Then she said, simply:

> "I know I didn't have enough today, but I'm going to keep putting in the work."

That sentence should be engraved over every school entrance, every boardroom, every synagogue door. "I didn't have enough today, but I'm going to keep putting in the work." That is not just resilience—it is emunah, faith.

Judaism doesn't shy away from failure. Our sacred texts are full of it.

- Adam and Eve eat the fruit.
- Noah drinks too much.
- Moses loses his temper.
- The Israelites build a golden calf.

And still the story continues. The Torah is not a record of perfection, but of persistence. Of failing forward.

In The Blessing of a Skinned Knee, Wendy Mogel writes that "children learn by falling down. They grow through mistakes." She sees skinned knees not as crises but as essential steps in becoming grounded, resilient human beings. Judaism, she teaches, invites us to bless the falling, because through it we discover how to rise.

Harvard professor Amy Edmondson, in her book Right Kind of Wrong, categorizes failure into three types:

1. Basic failures – mistakes in familiar territory: sending the wrong email.
2. Complex failures – when systems break down: a supply chain disruption.

3. Intelligent failures – the kind we need more of. These happen when we try something new, pursue a goal, take a risk with thoughtful awareness of its possibility of not working out.

Amanda Anisimova's loss wasn't a collapse. It was an intelligent failure. She tested herself in new territory, dared to reach the final, and came up short. But instead of hiding, she stood in front of the world and said, "This will make me stronger."

The Torah, too, is filled with intelligent failures—Abraham setting out without knowing the destination, Moses trying to lead a people who don't want to be led, Ruth choosing exile for love. What redeems these stories is not success, but meaning.

Anisimova quoted Marianne Williamson: "Pain can burn you up and destroy you, or burn you up and redeem you."

This is the theology of fire. Fire can destroy or illuminate, consume or purify. Think of the burning bush—on fire, but not consumed. Think of the menorah, lit from the tiniest remaining oil.

And think of Tisha B'Av, which we approach on the calendar now. A day of mourning and destruction, yes—but also a gateway to hope. Tradition tells us that the Mashiach will be born on Tisha B'Av. That even in the ruins, redemption takes its first breath.

We don't bless pain for its own sake. But we do bless what pain can become. That's why Judaism teaches us to say Baruch Dayan HaEmet—Blessed is the True Judge—when we hear of death. Not because we celebrate the loss, but because we sanctify truth. The truth that this hurts. The truth that we will carry it. The truth that we will keep going.

Tennis legend Pete Sampras called his loss to Stefan Edberg the most important match of his career. Not because he won. He didn't. But because afterward, he said:

> "I knew deep down in my heart that I didn't fight that hard… and I promised myself I would never let that happen again."

He went on to win 13 more majors.

This is the Jewish idea of teshuvah, repentance—not just returning from sin, but returning to our best selves after we've missed the mark. Teshuvah doesn't erase failure. It transforms it.

You can't grow into adulthood—or into faith—without failing. What matters is what we do with the loss. Do we wallow? Hide? Numb ourselves? Or do we walk through the valley—as Psalm 23 says—knowing God walks with us?

The Blessing of a Skinned Knee teaches us that resilience is a holy trait. Judaism teaches us that broken tablets are kept in the ark alongside the whole ones. And Amanda Anisimova teaches us that even on the biggest stage, after the most visible failure, you can still say:

“I hope to be back here again one day.”

That’s our prayer too. After every defeat. After every skinned knee, broken dream, hard conversation, closed door. May we keep showing up. May we keep working. May we come back again—stronger, softer, wiser.

Ken Y’hi Ratzon