First Failures: Falling Apart and Starting Over in the Book of Genesis

Rabbi Jan Uhrbach

Rabbi Jan Uhrbach brings a passion for prayer to the JTS community. Through her work as founding director of the Block / Kolker Center for Spiritual Arts, she develops and oversees programs and discussions, as well as prayer services on Shabbat and festivals, for the JTS community and the general public.

Rabbi Uhrbach loves being in the classroom at JTS, where she teaches courses on the meaning of liturgy, and a course she created titled “The Art of Leading Prayer.” She is tasked also with developing curriculum and resources for professionals and lay people seeking to revitalize their leadership and experience of prayer.

In addition to her role at JTS, Rabbi Uhrbach serves as the founding rabbi of the Conservative Synagogue of the Hamptons in Bridgehampton, Long Island, enabling her to mentor many of JTS’s rabbinical and cantorial students in a congregational setting. She has played a key role in the acclaimed Lev Shalem prayer book series as associate editor of Siddur Lev Shalem, the Shabbat and festival siddur published by the Rabbinical Assembly in 2016. She also served on the editorial committee for Machzor Lev Shalem.

A distinguished teacher of Torah, she is also a member of the Wexner Heritage faculty, and has taught and served as scholar-in-residence in many synagogues. Rabbi Uhrbach was ordained at JTS, where she was a Wexner Graduate Fellow. A graduate of Harvard Law School and Yale University, Rabbi Uhrbach served as Law Clerk to Federal District Judge Kimba M. Wood. She then joined the New York law firm of Satterlee Stephens Burke & Burke LLP, where she specialized in media litigation, becoming a partner of the firm in January 1996.
Genesis 1

1 When God began to create heaven and earth...
4 God saw that the light was good... (Day 1)
10... And God saw that this was good. (Day 3)
12... And God saw that this was good. (Day 3)
18... And God saw that this was good. (Day 4)
21... And God saw that this was good. (Day 5)
25 ... And God saw that this was good. (Day 6)
31 ... And God saw all that He had made, and found it very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

Genesis 2:18

And God said, “It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a fitting helper for him.”

Genesis 6:5-7

Adonai saw that great was human wickedness on earth, and how every impulse of his consciousness was nothing but bad, all the time. And Adonai regretted that [God] had made the human on earth, and [God’s] heart was saddened. Adonai said, “I will blot out from the earth the human whom I created—human together with beasts, creeping things, and birds of the sky; for I regret that I made them.”
1. Bereshit Rabbah 3:7
Rabbi Yeudah bar Simon said: it does not say, ‘It was evening,’ but ‘And it was evening.’ We derive that there was a time-system prior to this.
Rabbi Abbahu said: This teaches us that God would go on creating worlds and destroying them, until God created these, saying, ‘This one pleases me; those did not please me.’
Rabbi Pinhas said, Rabbi Abbahu derives it from here: ‘And God saw all that God had made, and behold it was very good,’ (Gen. 1:31) as if to say, ‘This one pleases me, those others did not please me.’

2. Bereshit Rabbah 1:4
Rabbi Ahavah ben Rabbi Ze’ira said: Also, Repentance, as it is written, “Before the mountains were brought forth . . .” (Ps. 90:2), and from that very moment, “You turn the human being to contrition, and say: Repent, children of humanity” (ib. 3).

3. Berakhot 34b
As Rabbi Abbahu said: In the place where ba-alei teshuvah stand, even the wholly righteous do not stand.

4. Gittin 43a
Rabba bar Rav Huna ...interpreted “And let this stumbling-block be under your hand” (Isaiah 3:6):  “A person cannot stand on [fulfill, truly understand] words of Torah unless they have stumbled in them.”

5. Proverbs 24:16
Seven times the righteous man falls and gets up, While the wicked are tripped by one misfortune.

6. quoted in David Bashevkin, Sin-a-gogue - Sin and Failure in Jewish Thought, page 26 (attrib. to Rabbi Rob Scheinberg)
As Elie Wiesel said, “God gave Adam a secret -- and that secret was not how to begin, but how to begin again.”
7. Megillah 25a-b
Our Rabbis taught: Some portions [of the Scripture] are both read and translated, some are read but not translated... The following are both read and translated: ...
The story of Tamar and Yehudah is both read and translated. Certainly! — We might think that [we should forbear] out of respect for Yehudah. Therefore we are told [that this is no objection]; [the passage] really redounds to his credit, because [it records that] he confessed....

8. Genesis Rabbah 93:6

“Then Yehudah came near (vayigash) to him” (Genesis 44:18).

Rabbi Yehudah, Rabbi Nehemiah, and the Rabbis commented.

Rabbi Yehudah said: He came near for battle, as it says, “So Yoav and the people that were with him drew near to battle” (2 Sam. 10:13).

Rabbi Nehemiah said: He came near for conciliation, as it says, “Then the children of Yehudah drew near to Joshua” (Josh. 14:6) -- to conciliate him.

The Rabbis said: He came near to pray, as it says, “And it came to pass at the time of the evening offering, that Elijah the prophet came near” (1 Kings 18:36).

Rabbi Leazar combined all these views: I come whether it be for battle, for conciliation, or for prayer.
A door closes

The last time we met
I wish the sun had been shining,
I wish I had been as gentle
with you as with my babies
still wet from the womb.
I wish I had better understood
what you were saying, underneath
the words, and addressed myself
to those underneath words.

I wish you had seen me
once more — a soft woman,
worthy of trust, full
of affection and respect.
Instead you saw — what? --
someone angry, demanding,
dangerous. Instead we sparred,
your heart on guard as if
we had never trusted.

But then the moments
when your eyes were full,
they were saying something —
what? I was so tight, intent
on stories, pulling out of you
stories I thought I needed, deserved,
stories that seemed important.
Instead I should have asked, *What are your eyes saying?*

A missed meeting is someone's fault,
isn't it? And the temptation is great
to blame, conclude the fault
was his — if only he hadn't
fought me, if only he had given
what I asked for. And the pain
is great to imagine the mistakes
were mine — if not for me, it all
would have turned out beautifully.
(1) About that time Judah left his brothers and camped near a certain Adullamite whose name was Hirah. (2) There Judah saw the daughter of a certain Canaanite whose name was Shua, and he married her and cohabited with her. (3) She conceived and bore a son, and he named him Er. (4) She conceived again and bore a son, and named him Onan. (5) Once again she bore a son, and named him Shelah; he was at Chezib when she bore him. (6) Judah got a wife for Er his first-born; her name was Tamar. (7) But Er, Judah's first-born, was displeasing to the LORD, and the LORD took his life. (8) Then Judah said to Onan, “Join with your brother's wife and do your duty by her as a brother-in-law, and provide offspring for your brother.” (9) But Onan, knowing that the seed would not count as his, let it go to waste whenever he joined with his brother's wife, so as not to provide offspring for his brother. (10) What he did was displeasing to the LORD, and He took his life also. (11) Then Judah said to his daughter-in-law Tamar, “Stay as a widow in my house until my son Shelah grows up”—for he thought, “He too might die like his brothers.” So Tamar went to live in her father's house. (12) A long time afterward, Shua's daughter, the wife of Judah, died. When his period of mourning was over, Judah went up to Timnah to his sheepshearers, together with his friend Hirah the Adullamite. (13) And Tamar was told, “Your father-in-law is coming up to Timnah for the sheepshearing.” (14) So she took off her widow's garb, covered her face with a veil, and, wrapping herself up, sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the road to Timnah; for she saw that Shelah was grown up, yet she had not been given to him as wife. (15) When Judah saw her, he took her for a harlot; for she had covered her face. (16) So he turned aside to her by the road and said, “Here, let me sleep with you”—for he did not know that she was his daughter-in-law. “What,” she asked, “will you pay for sleeping with me?” (17) He replied, “I will send a kid from my flock.” But she said, “You must leave a pledge until you have sent it.” (18) And he said, “What pledge shall I give you?” She replied, “Your seal and cord, and the staff which you carry.” So he gave them to her and slept with her, and she conceived by him. (19) Then she went on her way. She took off her veil and again put on her widow's garb. (20) Judah sent the kid by his friend the sheepshearer.
Adullamite, to redeem the pledge from the woman; but he could not find her. (21) He inquired of the people of that town, “Where is the cult prostitute, the one at Enaim, by the road?” But they said, “There has been no prostitute here.” (22) So he returned to Judah and said, “I could not find her; moreover, the townspeople said: There has been no prostitute here.” (23) Judah said, “Let her keep them, lest we become a laughingstock. I did send her this kid, but you did not find her.” (24) About three months later, Judah was told, “Your daughter-in-law Tamar has played the harlot; in fact, she is with child by harlotry.” “Bring her out,” said Judah, “and let her be burned.” (25) As she was being brought out, she sent this message to her father-in-law, “I am with child by the man to whom these belong.” And she added, “Examine these: whose seal and cord and staff are these?” (26) Judah recognized them, and said, “She is more in the right than I, inasmuch as I did not give her to my son Shelah.” And he was not intimate with her again. (27) When the time came for her to give birth, there were twins in her womb! (28) While she was in labor, one of them put out his hand, and the midwife tied a crimson thread on that hand, to signify: This one came out first. (29) But just then he drew back his hand, and out came his brother; and she said, “What a breach you have made for yourself!” So he was named Perez. (30) Afterward his brother came out, on whose hand was the crimson thread; he was named Zerah.

11. Genesis 43:8-10

(8) Then Judah said to his father Israel, “Send the boy in my care, and let us be on our way, that we may live and not die—you and we and our children. (9) I myself will be surety for him; you may hold me responsible: if I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, I shall stand guilty before you forever. (10) For we could have been there and back twice if we had not dawdled.”
12. Genesis 44:18-45:2

(18) Then Judah went up to him and said, “Please, my lord, let your servant appeal to my lord, and do not be impatient with your servant, you who are the equal of Pharaoh. (19) My lord asked his servants, ‘Have you a father or another brother?’ (20) We told my lord, ‘We have an old father, and there is a child of his old age, the youngest; his full brother is dead, so that he alone is left of his mother, and his father dotes on him.’ (21) Then you said to your servants, ‘Bring him down to me, that I may set eyes on him.’ (22) We said to my lord, ‘The boy cannot leave his father; if he were to leave him, his father would die.’ (23) But you said to your servants, ‘Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, do not let me see your faces.’ (24) When we came back to your servant my father, we reported my lord’s words to him. (25) “Later our father said, ‘Go back and procure some food for us.’ (26) We answered, ‘We cannot go down; only if our youngest brother is with us can we go down, for we may not show our faces to the man unless our youngest brother is with us.’ (27) Your servant my father said to us, ‘As you know, my wife bore me two sons. (28) But one is gone from me, and I said: Alas, he was torn by a beast! And I have not seen him since. (29) If you take this one from me, too, and he meets with disaster, you will send my white head down to Sheol in sorrow.’ (30) “Now, if I come to your servant my father and the boy is not with us—since his own life is so bound up with his—(31) when he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die, and your servants will send the white head of your servant our father down to Sheol in grief. (32) Now your servant has pledged himself for the boy to my father, saying, ‘If I do not bring him back to you, I shall stand guilty before my father forever.’ (33) Therefore, please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord instead of the boy, and let the boy go back with his brothers. (34) For how can I go back to my father unless the boy is with me? Let me not be witness to the woe that would overtake my father!” (1) Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried
out, “Have everyone withdraw from me!” So there was no one else about when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. (2) His sobs were so loud that the Egyptians could hear, and house of Pharaoh heard.