

How to Confront Your Mistakes and Try Again

Sep 3, 2016 | by [Sara Debbie Gutfreund](#)

Don't allow yesterday's mistakes to limit tomorrow's possibilities.

The millionaire investor James Altucher lost all his money, his home and his marriage in a short span of time. At one of his lowest points during this period, he got into an argument with his parents that resulted in shutting down all communication between them. Not long afterwards, his father passed away from a sudden stroke.

Right before his father's sudden death, his father had called him to try to make amends; James had refused to speak to him. He never got to say goodbye to his father; he never got the chance to say he was sorry. While he was still reeling from the pain of losing his father, James' mother blamed him for his father's death.

I know all this because when James lost everything, he didn't hide away and cover up his mistakes. He began to write, documenting and describing in detail all of his failures and what he had learned from them. He wrote books about his mistakes and what he was trying to do differently now. He picked himself up when he had literally lost everything and he said to himself: I wonder what would happen if I changed? If I stopped drinking to escape my pain. If I stopped making money and possessions the focus of my life? If I married again and built a marriage that I nurtured instead of ignored? If I reached out and tried to help people who were falling apart themselves?

James remarried and had children. He kept writing and falling and getting up again. He kept speaking about his mistakes and what he was learning from them. Today he has all his possessions literally in one knapsack. I don't know if his mother or anyone else ever forgave him, but he learned to forgive himself. He figured out how to move from despair to wonder by telling himself and anyone else who would listen: "The only truly safe thing you can do is to try, over and over again."

Reading his book made me wonder: What if I lost everything that I have? What would I do? Would I be as brave as James and say: I made a lot of mistakes? This is what I learned from them. This is how I'm going to try again. Or would I curl up in shame and lose hope? Be crushed by the guilt? Tell myself that no one else in the world has ever been lonely or scared or confused?

The Israeli month Elul is here; it's a month for us to examine the past year and identify our shortcomings, to find ways to change and become better. But every year when Elul begins, I feel that familiar wisp of dread. I don't want to look back at my whole year and stare at everything I've done wrong. I don't want to change. I want to pretend that everything is just fine. I don't have James' courage. I can't remember how to try, over and over again.

But what if I stopped for a moment, dropped my defenses and asked myself: What could I accomplish if I changed? Who could I become if I ask myself each day this month: What isn't working in my life? How can I change it? What would my life be like if I wasn't ashamed of tripping and falling? What kind of person could I be if I picked myself up, brushed myself off and constantly asked myself: How can I begin again?

Instead of denying or covering up my failures, I could learn to say: I made all these mistakes, and I want to learn and grow from them. I could turn to God and say: I want to become better and I need Your help. I want to be close to You again. What would my life be like if I let myself be vulnerable and lived with the reality that God loves me and believes in me?

God doesn't want me to curl up in shame and hide from my mistakes. He wants me to wonder who I can become if I hold onto my connection with Him and refuse to let go. He wants me to refuse to allow yesterday's mistakes to limit tomorrow's possibilities. I wonder what my life could be like if the one thing that I had was the faith my Creator has in me. I wonder who I could become if the one thing I had was something I could never lose: my connection with the One who created a world where hope is never lost and mistakes are never dead-ends.

This is the time to inculcate the belief that we can change anything, as long as we remember that no matter how hard we fall, we can get up and keep trying, over and over again.

About the Author

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Sara Debbie Gutfreund received her BA in English from the University of Pennsylvania and her MA in Family Therapy from the University of North Texas. She has taught parenting classes and self-development seminars and provided adolescent counseling. She writes extensively for many online publications and in published anthologies of Jewish women's writing. She and her husband spent 14 wonderful years raising their five children in Israel, and now live in Blue Ridge Estates in Waterbury, Connecticut, where Sara Debbie enjoys skiing and running in her free time.