



THE PATH TO SUCCESS





Setting the Stage

Chance and Circumstance

by David Leonhardt - New York Times, November 2008

A review of Malcolm Gladwell's best-selling book, "Outliers."

In 1984, a young man named Malcolm graduated from the University of Toronto and moved to the United States to try his hand at journalism. Thanks to his uncommonly clear writing style and keen eye for a story, he quickly landed a job at The Washington Post. After less than a decade at The Post, he moved up to the pinnacle of literary journalism, The New Yorker. There, he wrote articles full of big ideas about the hidden patterns of ordinary life, which then became grist for two No. 1 best-selling books. In the vast world of nonfiction writing, he is as close to a singular talent as exists today.

Or at least that's one version of the story of Malcolm Gladwell. Here is another:

In 1984, a young man named Malcolm graduated from the University of Toronto and moved to the United States to try his hand at journalism. No one could know it then, but he arrived with nearly the perfect background for his time. His mother was a psychotherapist and his father a mathematician. Their professions pointed young Malcolm toward the behavioral sciences, whose popularity would explode in the 1990s. His mother also just happened to be a writer on the side. So unlike most children of mathematicians and therapists, he came to learn, as

he would later recall, "that there is beauty in saying something clearly and simply." As a journalist, he plumbed the behavioral research for optimistic lessons about the human condition, and he found an eager audience during the heady, proudly geeky '90s. His first book, "The Tipping Point," was published in March 2000, just days before the Nasdaq peaked.

These two stories about Gladwell are both true, and yet they are also very different. The first personalizes his success. It is the classically American version of his career, in that it gives individual characteristics — talent, hard work, Horatio Alger-like pluck — the starring role. The second version doesn't necessarily deny these characteristics, but it does sublimate them. The protagonist is not a singularly talented person who took advantage of opportunities. He is instead a talented person who took advantage of singular opportunities.

“*Outliers are those who have been given opportunities — and who have had the strength and presence of mind to seize them.*”

Gladwell's latest book, "Outliers," is a passionate argument for taking the second version of the story more seriously than we now do. "It is not the brightest who succeed," Gladwell writes. "Nor is success simply the sum of the decisions and efforts we make on our own behalf. It is, rather, a gift. Outliers are those who have been given opportunities — and who have had the strength and presence of mind to seize them."

Questions to Consider

- ▶ What do you think are some of the key factors that help make a person successful?

ENGAGING THE TEXT

Two Stories About Jewish Leaders

↻ R' Akiva & Acher: A Mystical Contrast ↻

תלמוד בבלי מסכת חגיגה יד עמוד ב

תנו רבנן: ארבעה נכנסו בפרדס, ואלו הן: בן עזאי, ובן זומא, אחר, ורבי עקיבא. אמר להם רבי עקיבא: כשאתם מגיעין אצל אבני שיש טהור אל תאמרו מים מים! משום שנאמר (תהלים קא): "דובר שקרים לא יכון לנגד עיני." בן עזאי הציץ ומת, עליו הכתוב אומר (תהלים קטז): "יקר בעיני ה' המותה לחסידיו." בן זומא הציץ ונפגע, ועליו הכתוב אומר (משלי כה): "דבש מצאת אכל דרך פן תשבענו והקאתו. אחר קיצץ בנטיעות. רבי עקיבא יצא בשלום.

Talmud Chagiga 14b

The Rabbis taught: Four Sages entered the Pardes [i.e. they studied the deep secrets of the Torah]. They were: Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Acher [Elisha ben Avuya is called "Acher" which means "the other one," because of what happened to him after he entered the Pardes] and Rabbi Akiva...

Acher became a heretic. Rabbi Akiva entered in peace, and left in peace.

Acher was a Tanna (one of the Rabbis of the Mishna) who ended his life by leaving Judaism.

Rabbi Akiva began his life as an unaffiliated Jew (Kesubos 62b) and later became the Rebbe through which the Oral Law was developed (Sanhedrin 86a).

Questions to Consider

- ▶ What accounted for the diametrically opposed lives of Rebbe Akiva and Acher? What made Acher leave Judaism, while Rabbi Akiva became a great Rebbe?

ENGAGING THE TEXT

A Study in Contrasts: R' Akiva & Acher

תלמוד בבלי מסכת חגיגה טו עמוד א-ב

שאל אחר את ר"מ לאחר שיצא לתרבות רעה א"ל: מאי דכתיב (קהלת ז, יד): "גם את זה לעומת זה עשה האלהים אמר לו כל מה שברא הקב"ה ברא כנגדו ברא הרים ברא גבעות ברא ימים ברא נהרות אמר לו ר"ע רבך לא אמר כך אלא ברא צדיקים

ברא רשעים ברא גן עדן ברא גיהנם כל אחד ואחד יש לו ב' חלקים אחד בגן עדן ואחד בגיהנם זכה צדיק נטל חלקו וחלק חברו בגן עדן נתחייב רשע נטל חלקו וחלק חברו בגיהנם אמר רב מרשיא מאי קראה גבי צדיקים כתיב (ישעיהו סא, ז): "לכן בארצם משנה יירשו" גבי רשעים כתיב (ירמיהו יז, יח): "ומשנה שברון שברם" שאל אחר את ר"מ לאחר שיצא לתרבות רעה: מאי דכתיב (איוב כח, יז) "לא יערכנה זהב וזכוכית ותמורתה כלי פז" אמר לו: אלו דברי תורה שקשין לקנותן ככלי זהב וכלי פז ונוחין לאבדן ככלי זכוכית אמר לו ר"ע רבך לא אמר כך אלא מה כלי זהב וכלי זכוכית אע"פ שנשברו יש להם תקנה אף ת"ח אע"פ שסרח יש לו תקנה אמר לו אף אתה חזור בכך אמר לו כבר שמעתי מאחורי הפרגוד שובו בנים שובבים חוץ מאחר תקפיה עייליה לבי מדרשא. א"ל לינוקא: פסוק לי פסוקך. אמר לו (ישעיהו מח, כב) "אין שלום אמר ה'"...

א"ל פסוק לי פסוקך א"ל (תהלים נ, טז) "ולרשע אמר אלהים מה לך לספר חקי וגו'" ההוא ינוקא הוה מגמגם בלישניה אשתמע כמה דאמר ליה "ולאלישע אמר אלהים."

Talmud Chagiga 15a-15b

Acher asked Rebbe Meir a question after he had already strayed away from Judaism. Acher asked him: "What is the meaning of that which the Torah writes: *'But as for wisdom... mankind does not know its worth... gold and glass cannot approximate it, nor can its exchange be in golden articles'*?"

R. Meir replied: "This refers to matters of Torah that are as difficult to acquire as gold vessels, but they are as easy to lose through forgetfulness as glass vessels."

Acher replied: "That is not what R. Akiva said. Rather, he taught you that just as there is a remedy for gold vessels and glass vessels even if they break, so too, a Torah scholar has a remedy even if he becomes sour: He can do teshuva."

R. Meir said to Acher: "So, you too, as a great Torah scholar, return to your spiritual devotion."

Acher replied to R. Meir: "It's too late, I already heard a heavenly voice proclaim, "Return, My children - except for Acher!"

A different incident occurred with R. Meir and Acher. Acher was once riding a horse on Shabbos, as Rabbi Meir walked behind him to learn Torah. Acher told R. Meir to return, since he had reached the permissible boundary to walk on Shabbos.

R. Meir replied: "You too, go back to your earlier Torah observance."

Acher said: "I already told you, I heard a Heavenly voice proclaiming that everyone can return except for me."

Unwilling to leave matters as they were, R. Meir grabbed Acher and thrust him into a Beis Medrash. Acher said to the young boy standing outside: "Recite your verse for me."

The boy said to Acher: "*There is no peace, Hashem said, to the wicked.*" (Yeshaya

48:22)... [R. Meir and Acher visited a total of 13 synagogues and at each one, Acher hears a verse that seems to be very foreboding.]

At the last synagogue with the last child, Acher asked the boy to recite the verse he had heard. The boy replied: “*But to the wicked [Hebrew: v’larasha] G-d said: To what purpose do you recount My decrees?*”

That boy was prone to mumble his words and when he recited this verse, it sounded to Acher as if he said, “*But to Elisha (Hebrew: v’le’Elisha), G-d said: To what purpose do you recount my decrees?*”



Questions to Consider

- ▶ What qualities does Acher seem to possess in this story, that may have contributed to his downfall?

Many commentaries explain that the voices Acher heard were not truly from Heaven, but his own interpretation of the signs of negativity in his life. While Acher convinced himself that he had no hope, Rebbe Akiva found inspiration even in the most difficult circumstances.

☞ R' Akiva Reacts to Destruction ☞

תלמוד בבלי מסכת מכות כד עמוד ב

שוב פעם אחת היו עולין לירושלים כיון שהגיעו להר הצופים קרעו בגדיהם כיון שהגיעו להר הבית ראו שועל שיצא מבית קדשי הקדשים התחילו הן בוכין ור"ע מצחק אמרו לו מפני מה אתה מצחק אמר להם מפני מה אתם בוכים אמרו לו מקום שכתוב בו והזר הקרב יומת ועכשיו שועלים הלכו בו ולא נבכה אמר להן לכך אני מצחק דכתיב ואעידה לי עדים נאמנים את אוריה הכהן ואת זכריה בן יברכיהו וכי מה ענין אוריה אצל זכריה אוריה במקדש ראשון וזכריה במקדש שני אלא תלה הכתוב נבואתו של זכריה בנבואתו של אוריה באוריה כתיב לכן בגללכם ציון שדה תחרש [וגו'] בזכריה כתיב עוד ישבו זקנים וזקנות ברחובות ירושלם עד שלא נתקיימה נבואתו של אוריה הייתי מתיירא שלא תתקיים נבואתו של זכריה עכשיו שנתקיימה נבואתו של אוריה בידוע שנבואתו של זכריה מתקיימת בלשון הזה אמרו לו עקיבא ניחמתנו עקיבא ניחמתנו!

Talmud Makkos 24b

On another occasion, the Sages were coming to Jerusalem after the destruction of the Second Temple. When they reached the Mount of Tzofim and were able to see the city of Jerusalem in its destruction, they ripped their shirts in mourning. When they came to the Temple Mount, they saw a fox emerging from the Holy of Holies, and they started to cry. But R. Akiva smiled.

They said to him, “Why are you smiling? The Torah describes the Temple as a place so holy that it cannot be approached, and now foxes are prowling over it! Shouldn’t

you be crying?"

Rebbe Akiva said to them, "That is exactly why I am smiling. For the Torah compares the prophecy of Zechariah and Uriah. Why are they mentioned together? For during the time of Uriah they prophesied the destruction of the Temple, but Zechariah described unity and utopia in Jerusalem. As long as the Uriah's prophecies of destruction during the time of the First Temple were not fulfilled, I feared that the optimistic prophecies of Zechariah would not be fulfilled either. Now that the prophecy of Uriah has been fulfilled, and Jerusalem and the Temple Mount are totally desolate, it is certain that the redemption prophecy of Zechariah will be fulfilled as well.

The Rabbis replied to Rebbe Akiva: "Akiva, you have comforted us; Akiva, you have comforted us!"



Questions to Consider

- ▶ How was Rebbe Akiva's reaction to destruction different from Acher's reaction to what seemed to be signs of his hopelessness?

❖ R' Akiva's Philosophy in Life ❖

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות ס עמוד ב

אמר רב הונא אמר רב משום רבי מאיר וכן תנא משמיה דר' עקיבא:
לעולם יהא אדם רגיל לומר כל דעביד רחמנא לטב עביד כי הא דרבי עקיבא דהוה קאזיל
באורחא מטא לההיא מתא בעא אושפיזא לא יהבי ליה אמר כל דעביד רחמנא לטב אזל
ובת בדברא והוה בהדיה תרנגולא וחמרא ושרגא אתא זיקא כבייה לשרגא אתא שונרא
אכליה לתרנגולא אתא אריה אכליה לחמרא אמר כל דעביד רחמנא לטב ביה בליליא
אתא גייסא שבייה למתא אמר להו לאו אמרי לכו כל מה שעושה הקדוש ברוך הוא
הכל לטובה.

ואמר רב הונא אמר רב משום ר' מאיר: לעולם יהיו דבריו של אדם מועטין לפני הקב"ה
שנאמר (קהלת ה, א) אל תבהל על פיך ולבך אל ימהר להוציא דבר לפני האלהים
כי האלהים בשמים ואתה על הארץ על כן יהיו דבריך מעטים.

Talmud Brachos 60b

...and so has a Braisa taught in the name of R' Akiva: A person should always be accustomed to say: Whatever the Merciful One [G-d] does, He does for the best.

Like the incident involving R' Akiva: He was once traveling along the road. When he reached a certain city, he requested lodgings, but no one provided him any. He said: "Whatever the Merciful One does is for the best." He went and slept in the field. Now, he had with him a rooster, a donkey, and a lamp; a cat came and ate the

rooster; a lion came and ate the donkey. After suffering those losses, R' Akiva said: "Whatever the Merciful One does is for the best."

That very night, an army came and captured the city.

R' Akiva said: "Did I not tell you, 'Whatever the Holy One, Blessed is He does is all for good?'"

(Rashi: Because if the lamp had been lit, the soldiers would have discovered him; likewise, had the donkey brayed or the rooster crowed, the soldiers would have heard the noise and come and captured him.)



Winston Churchill

A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.

? Questions to Consider

- ▶ Do you think that being optimistic or pessimistic has a real impact on whether or not you will be successful?