



Outliers



THE STORY OF SUCCESS

JEWISH LEADERSHIP

#1 bestselling author of *The Torah* and *Talmud*

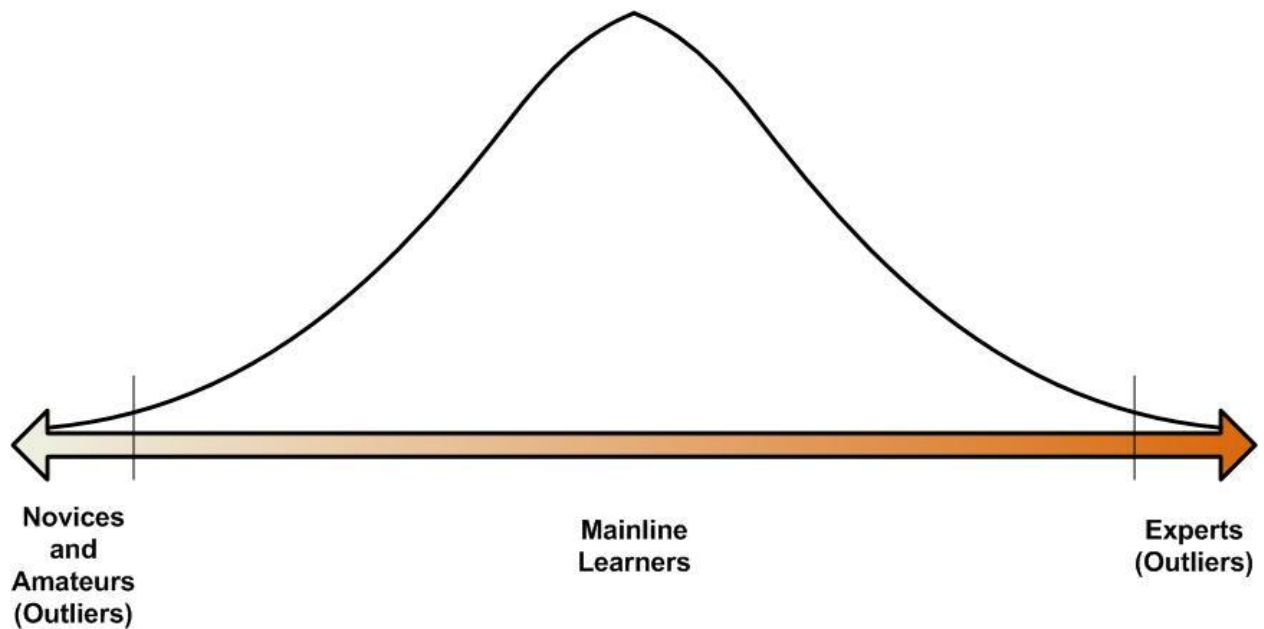
OUTLIERS: A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE

WHAT IS AN OUTLIER?

out-li-er

n.

1. A person or thing away or detached from the main body or system.
2. *Geology*: a younger rock formation among older rocks.
3. **Statistics**: a result differing greatly from others in the same sample.



TWO PERSPECTIVES ON SUCCESS

From David Leonhardt's November 2008, New York Times article, "Chance and Circumstance," reviewing Malcolm Gladwell's best-selling book, "Outliers."

STORY #1

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.

STORY #2

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.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THESE TWO STORIES?

TWO STORIES ABOUT JEWISH LEADERS: REBBE AKIVA AND ACHER

R' AKIVA & ACHER: A MYSTICAL CONTRAST

תלמוד בבלי מסכת חגיגה דף 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 ק"א+ דובר שקרים לא יכון לנגד עיני. בן עזאי הציץ ומת, עליו הכתוב אומר (תהלים קט"ז) יקר בעיני ה' המוטה לחסידיו. בן זומא הציץ ונפגע, ועליו הכתוב אומר (משלי כ"ה) דבש מצאת אכל דרך פן תשבענו והקאתו. אחר קיצץ בנטיעות. רבי עקיבא יצא בשלום.

The Rabbis taught: Four Sages entered the Pardes. They were Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Acher [Elisha ben Avuya, called Acher - 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.

R. AKIVA BEGAN HIS LIFE AS AN UNAFFILIATED JEW (KESUBOS 62B) AND LATER ON BECAME THE REBBE THROUGH WHICH THE ORAL LAW WAS DEVELOPED (SANHEDRIN 86A).

WHAT ACCOUNTED FOR THE DIAMETRICALLY OPPOSED LIVES OF REBBE AKIVA AND ACHER?

BELOW WE WILL PRESENT IN GREATER DETAIL THE LIVES AND PHILOSOPHIES OF R. AKIVA AND ACHER IN ORDER TO BETTER UNDERSTAND THE CONTRAST BETWEEN THEIR LIVES.

THE STORY OF ELISHA BEN AVUYAH (ACHER) CHAGIGAH 15B

תלמוד בבלי מסכת חגיגה דף טו עמוד א

שאל אחר את רבי מאיר לאחר שיצא לתרבות רעה, אמר ליה: מאי דכתיב (קהלת ז') גם את זה לעמת זה עשה האלהים? - אמר לו: כל מה שברא הקדוש ברוך הוא - ברא כנגדו, ברא הרים - ברא גבעות, ברא ימים - ברא נהרות. אמר לו: רבי עקיבא רבך לא אמר כך, אלא: ברא צדיקים - ברא רשעים, ברא גן עדן - ברא גיהנם. כל אחד ואחד יש לו שני חלקים, אחד בגן עדן ואחד בגיהנם, זכה צדיק - נטל חלקו וחלקו חברו בגן עדן, נתחייב רשע - נטל חלקו וחלקו חברו בגיהנם. אמר רב משרשיא: מאי קראה? גבי צדיקים כתיב (ישעיהו ס"א) לכן בארצם משנה יירשו. גבי רשעים כתיב (ירמיהו י"ז) ומשנה שברון שברם. שאל אחר את רבי מאיר לאחר שיצא לתרבות רעה: מאי דכתיב +איוב כ"ח+ לא יערכנה זהב וזכוכית ותמורתה כלי פז - אמר לו: אלו דברי תורה, שקשין לקנותן ככלי זהב וכלי פז, ונוחין לאבדן ככלי זכוכית. - אמר לו: רבי עקיבא רבך לא אמר כך, אלא: מה כלי זהב וכלי זכוכית, אף על פי שנשברו יש להם תקנה - אף תלמיד חכם, אף על פי שסרח יש לו תקנה. - אמר לו: אף אתה חזור בך! - אמר לו: כבר שמעתי מאחורי הפרגוד: שובו בנים שובבים - חוץ מאחר.

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 even if he sours there is a remedy for him: 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 me."

תלמוד בבלי מסכת חגיגה דף טו עמוד א

שאל אחר את רבי מאיר לאחר שיצא לתרבות רעה, אמר ליה: מאי דכתיב (קהלת ז') גם את זה לעמת זה עשה האלהים? - אמר לו: כל מה שברא הקדוש ברוך הוא - ברא כנגדו, ברא הרים - ברא גבעות, ברא ימים - ברא נהרות. אמר לו: רבי עקיבא רבך לא אמר כך, אלא: ברא צדיקים - ברא רשעים, ברא גן עדן - ברא גיהנם. כל אחד ואחד יש לו שני חלקים, אחד בגן עדן ואחד בגיהנם, זכה צדיק - נטל חלקו וחלקו חברו בגן עדן, נתחייב רשע - נטל חלקו וחלקו חברו בגיהנם. אמר רב משרשיא: מאי קראה? גבי צדיקים כתיב (ישעיהו ס"א) לכן בארצם משנה יירשו. גבי רשעים כתיב (ירמיהו י"ז) ומשנה שברון שברם. שאל אחר את רבי מאיר לאחר שיצא לתרבות רעה: מאי דכתיב +איוב כ"ח+ לא יערכנה זהב וזכוכית ותמורתה כלי פז - אמר לו: אלו דברי תורה, שקשין לקנותן ככלי זהב וכלי פז, ונוחין לאבדן ככלי זכוכית. - אמר לו: רבי עקיבא רבך לא אמר כך, אלא: מה כלי זהב וכלי זכוכית, אף על פי שנשברו יש להם תקנה - אף תלמיד חכם, אף על פי שסרח יש לו תקנה. - אמר לו: אף אתה חזור בך! - אמר לו: כבר שמעתי מאחורי הפרגוד: שובו בנים שובבים - חוץ מאחר.

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."

....(R. Meir and Acher visit 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), God 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), God said, To what purpose do you recount my decrees."

WHAT QUALITIES DOES ACHER SEEM TO POSSESS IN THE STORY?

R. AKIVA REACTS TO DESTRUCTION:
MAKKOS 24B

תלמוד בבלי מסכת מכות דף 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: +במדבר א'+ והזר הקרב יומת ועכשיו שועלים הלכו בו ולא נבכה? אמר להן: לכך אני מצחק, דכתיב: +ישעיהו ח'+ 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: (מיכה ג') לכן בגללכם ציון שדה תחרש וגו' בזכריה כתיב: (זכריה ח') 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, ניהמתנו! עקיבא, ניהמתנו.

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 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 prophesized the destruction of 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 Zecharia 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 Zecharia will be fulfilled as well.

The Rabbis replied to Rebbe Akiva: Akiva you have comforted us; Akiva you have comforted us.

HOW WAS REBBE AKIVA'S REACTION TO DESTRUCTION DIFFERENT THAN ACHER'S REACTION TO WHAT SEEMED TO BE SIGN'S OF HIS HOPELESSNESS?

R. AKIVA'S PHILOSOPHY IN LIFE
BRACHOS 60B

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ברכות דף ס עמוד ב

אמר רב הונא אמר רב משום רבי מאיר, וכן תנא משמיה דרבי 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 אכלא 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 רבי מאיר: לעולם יהיו דבריו של אדם מועטין לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא, שנאמר (קהלת ה') אל תבהל על פיך ולבך אל ימהר להוציא דבר לפני האלהים כי האלהים בשמים ואתה על הארץ על כן יהיו דבריך מעטים.

...and so has a Braisa taught in the name of R' Akiva: A person should always be accustomed to say: Whatever the merciful one does, he does for the best.

Like that incident involving R' Akiva: For 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: For had the lamp been lit the soldiers would have discovered him; likewise had the donkey brayed or the rooster crowed they would have heard the noise and come and captured him)

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.

MALCOLM GLADWELL'S OUTLIER PRINCIPLE

RETURNING TO THE STORIES WE BEGAN WITH...

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.

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."



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

He doesn't actually tell his own life story in the book. (But he lurks offstage, since he does describe the arc of his mother's Jamaican family.) Instead, he tells other success stories, often using the device of back-to-back narratives. He starts with a tale of individual greatness, about the Beatles or the titans of Silicon Valley or the enormously successful

generation of New York Jews born in the early 20th century. Then he adds details that undercut that tale.

So Bill Gates is introduced as a young computer programmer from Seattle whose brilliance and ambition outshine the brilliance and ambition of the thousands of other young programmers. But then Gladwell takes us back to Seattle, and we discover that Gates's high school happened to have a computer club when almost no other high schools did. He then lucked into the opportunity to use the computers at the University of Washington, for hours on end. By the time he turned 20, he had spent well more than 10,000 hours as a programmer.

At the end of this revisionist tale, Gladwell asks Gates himself how many other teenagers in the world had as much experience as he had by the early 1970s. "If there were 50 in the world, I'd be stunned," Gates says. "I had a better exposure to software development at a young age than I think anyone did in that period of time, and all because of an incredibly lucky series of events." Gates's talent and drive were surely unusual. But Gladwell suggests that his opportunities may have been even more so.

**A pessimist sees the
difficulty in every
opportunity;**
**An optimist sees the
opportunity in every
difficulty.**
-Winston Churchill

