

# Marshmallows, Ketchup, and Redemption

## How Leaders Manage Expectations

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In a psychological experiment of the late 1960s and early 1970s, preschoolers were offered a choice between eating one marshmallow now or two marshmallows after waiting until the experimenter returned after a fifteen-minute absence.

Follow-up studies in what became known as the Stanford Marshmallow Experiment revealed that children who waited had better life outcomes: higher SAT scores, cognitive competencies, educational achievement, and more. Achieving good outcomes requires patience and the capacity to wait. Leaders too need to recognize that meaningful change takes time and patience.

You may remember the famous Heinz Ketchup commercial from the late 1970s showing children waiting—and waiting—for the ketchup to come out of the bottle. Carly Simon's song "Anticipation" played in the background, and the tagline at the end advertised "thick, rich Heinz Ketchup, the taste that's worth the wait."

What is the most famous question our kids ask us two minutes into a car ride? "Are we there yet?" It is a mark of maturity to recognize that getting "there" takes time.

Jews have not had to depend on marshmallows, ketchup, and car rides to learn this lesson. I am a firm believer that traditional Jewish texts provide meaningful leadership lessons, and this case is no exception. In the dialogue following God's directive to Moses to redeem the Jewish people from Egyptian servitude, Moses does everything he can to avoid the mission. And, at the end of a long conversation, he pleads, "Please, God, send whomever You will send [*sh'lach na b'yad tishlach*]" (Exodus 4:13). But God angrily ends the debate. Moses is to leave forthwith for Pharaoh's palace (Exodus 3:7–4:17).

I have three problems with this story. First, where is Moses's respect for God? God had sought out Moses, telling him explicitly that his efforts would succeed: "They will heed your voice" (Exodus 3:18). Yet, immediately thereafter, Moses insists, "They will not believe me; they will not heed my voice" (Exodus 4:1). How could Moses so blatantly and repeatedly reject God's will in an argument that, our Rabbis teach us, lasted for an entire week?<sup>1</sup>

Secondly, how can we understand the reluctance on the part of Moses to help his fellow Jews? After all, he was intimately familiar with what they were experiencing in Egypt, to the point of his having killed an Egyptian taskmaster many years earlier and having to flee for his life (Exodus 2:11–15). Why didn't Moses jump at the opportunity to return to Egypt with God at his side and redeem his sisters and brothers?

Finally, what is the meaning of this enigmatic plea, "Send whomever You will send [*sh'lach na b'yad tishlach*]"? Whom does Moses have in mind?

I once heard Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903–1993) address all three questions. He cited the midrashic work *Pirkei d'Rabbi*

*Eliezer* (chapter 40), which notes that Moses was referring here to Elijah the Prophet (question 3). "Don't send me," he told God. "Send Elijah." But why Elijah? And why did God peremptorily reject his proposal?

Knowing that Elijah was destined to be the harbinger of redemption, Moses argued, "I would happily do what You ask if I thought that the Exodus would lead immediately to the final redemption. But it won't. I know that if You send me, the Jewish people will first have to wander in the desert for forty years. Then even after we get to Israel, we will have to suffer the destruction of two Temples and go into a long and painful exile marked by tragedy after tragedy: the murder of the Ten Martyrs (second century); the Crusaders' massacre of Rhineland Jewry (eleventh century); more Crusader killing (twelfth century); the burning of the Talmud (thirteenth century); the Black Death Massacres (fourteenth century); the expulsion from Spain (fifteenth century); the Chmielnicki Massacres (seventeenth century); the Kishinev pogrom (twentieth century); the Holocaust (twentieth century); and then repeated acts of terrorism—buses blowing up on the streets of Jerusalem, rockets flying, yeshiva boys gunned down in front of their Gemaras, innocent people stabbed in synagogues and on the streets of Israel (twenty-first century)."

"What is the point," Moses continued, "of sending me now if, after me, You will anyway have to send someone else to usher in the final redemption? Why redeem Israel from slavery now if they will only be enslaved again and again and again? I beg You! Don't send me! Send Elijah and be done with it!" Moses showed God no disrespect (question 1). He just loved Israel so much that he wanted the messianic era to arrive immediately (question 2).

But God knew the lesson of patience. "Redemption doesn't work that way," God replied. "Yes, some day I will send Elijah (Malachi 3:23), but now I am sending you."<sup>2</sup>

Nothing profoundly good comes easily and immediately. Redemption, too, is not direct, straightforward, linear, unequivocal, automatic, and guaranteed. It is complicated, circuitous, and ambiguous. Redemption takes time. Redemption takes patience. Redemption is a process.

So is everything that we all do, for we too are part of this long march toward redemption. As leaders in Jewish life, we feel the need to push hard, very hard, to achieve our goals; we often feel that we do not have the luxury of patience. But we need to internalize God's lesson to Moses. All meaningful and lasting change is a process. We should not despair and disengage when the results we want are not as quickly forthcoming as we would like.

Extra marshmallows take patience. Ketchup takes patience. Long car rides take patience.

Jewish literacy takes patience. Jewish communal and religious engagement takes patience. Strengthening Jewish peoplehood takes patience. Ultimate redemption takes patience.

So we push ahead with full force but stay the course when the going gets rough. If we persevere over time, we will prevail. As Maimonides taught, "We are in possession of a divine assurance that Israel is indestructible and imperishable, and will always continue to be a preeminent community."<sup>3</sup>





# MORE THAN MANAGING

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THE RELENTLESS PURSUIT OF  
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