

# AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps

## Torah Portion – Noah

### Failure, Frustration and Learning

Rabbi Adda son of Rabbi Hanina said: Had Israel not sinned, only the Five Books [of Moses] and the Book of Joshua (which describes the boundaries of the land of Israel) would have been given to them. And the proof? *From much vexation proceedeth much wisdom.* (Eccl.1:18)  
[Bavli Nedarim 22b]

אמר רב אדא ברבי חנינא: אלמלא חטאו ישראל לא ניתן להם אלא חמשה חומשי תורה וספר יהושע בלבד, שערכה של ארץ ישראל הוא, מאי טעמא? +קהלת א+ כי ברוב חכמה רב כעס.

**AVODAH Commentary:** Rabbi Adda suggests that the vast majority of the Hebrew Bible was given to the Jewish people only because they did not follow the original teachings contained in the first six books (Had Israel not sinned...). Vexed and frustrated, God finds it necessary to teach us repeatedly how to live as a holy people.

When working for social change, we often face situations that make us frustrated or angry. Rabbi Adda suggests that these hard situations can be revelatory, creating new forms of wisdom that would otherwise not exist. Sometimes the learning that comes from these situations is so important that it becomes an integral part of “our story,” our personal and collective scripture.

As we struggle to perfect world, we needn't make its imperfections our enemies. In fact, much real learning would never take place were it not for our imperfections & strugglings along the way. And much of the best teaching would never take place if it were not for difficult students.]

**Note:** The verse from Ecclesiastes is generally understood to mean: “The more wisdom, the more vexation.” Taking advantage of the verse’s ambiguous grammar, Rabbi Adda reads it in reverse order: “The more vexation, the more wisdom.”

**Questions:** American civil rights activist and author Frederick Douglass said, “Without struggle, there is no progress.” Do you think that progress *requires* struggle? Does gaining wisdom require struggle, too?

What is the connection implied by Rabbi Adda between sin and wisdom? One final text to help you think:

אמר רבי אבהו: מקום שבעלי תשובה עומדין - צדיקים גמורים אינם עומדין

Rabbi Abbahu taught: Those who has never sinned cannot stand in the place of those who have sinned and repented. [Berakhaot 34b]