

Balancing Ego and Humility – Rabbi Stephen Wise High holidays 2017 – 5777

My son Jacob's baseball team needed a trainer/bench coach this past summer and I decided to step up to the plate. I've had a bit of experience coaching but I realized pretty quickly that Jacob is pretty good and had gotten to a level beyond my expertise. Sure I could coach him when he was 6 years old in t-ball when all I had to do was put the ball on the tee and tell him to swing. When he hit the ball out of the park I congratulated myself on my excellent coaching ability. But when he made the rep team, the coaches told me to leave the coaching to them. They realized the dangers of too many cooks in the kitchen and I was happy to go back to being a proud dad in the stands.

But now that I'm back coaching on the bench I have found that it's a very tricky balance to maintain. On the one hand, based on my knowledge of watching and playing the game I want to give my opinions and offer advice or suggestions for the betterment of the players and the success of the team. At the same time I need to be humble enough to know that I don't know everything about baseball and can sometimes make mistakes in judgment. It's not like I'm the Jewish centerfield for the Toronto blue Jays, making superman catches every night. Moreover, as much as it appears youth sports are for adults to live vicariously through their children, I've learned that youth sports are actually for youth. I want them to experience the game as it happens. If they're not positioned right they're going to miss the ball. A coach is not always going to be around yelling at them to move over. They're going to have to internalize the game on their own. Unlike other sports that rely a lot on instinct and athleticism, baseball is also a thinking sport. The kids have to remember how many outs there are, where they should throw the ball, who's covering second, what happens if it goes to the outfield. It may appear slow but the amount of concentration required is exhausting. Being a good coach necessitates finding that delicate balance between having enough ego to coach the kids on how to play the game tempered with enough humility to let the kids learn and play the game on their own.

There is a Jewish proverb that best sums this up. **סלועה ארבנ יליבשב**

וְאִנְכִי עֶפֶר וְאֶפֶר:

The entire world was created for me, and I am but dust and ashes. an 18th-century chasidic sage suggested each human being should write down these two phrases and have one in each pocket at all times. We human beings were created by god, we are one of Gods creations and we been given the smarts and abilities to make our way in this world – it is all open to us. Yet at the same, we were made from dust and when we die, we will return to dust, which reminds us to be modest and aware of others in the world and how fragile is our existence. We are always trying to find that balance, between ego that allows us to excel, and humility that keeps us grounded. This affects every decision we make and every great coach, every great leader, every great teacher, has been able to find that balance.

During a nationally televised town hall forum a few months ago, Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton showed viewers that she has that balance. Rabbi Jonathan Spira-Savett of Temple Beth Abraham in Nashua, New Hampshire tried to challenge her by quoting this Chasidic teaching and then asked Clinton, “How do you cultivate the ego necessary to be president and integrate humility as well?”

Clinton stopped and was surprised and delighted by the question. Without notes or teleprompters, she then delivered a thoughtful and spiritual response, studded with theological jewels.

"I think about this a lot... and struggle with a lot of these issues about ambition and humility, about service and self-gratification, all of the human questions that all of us deal with, but when you put yourself out into the public arena, I think it's incumbent upon you to be as self-conscious as possible. This is hard for me. You know, I never thought I'd be standing on a stage here asking people to vote for me for president. I always wanted to be of service. And so I have had to come to grips with how much more difficult it often is for me to talk about myself than to talk about what I want to do for other people. So I'm constantly trying to balance how do I assume the mantle of a position as essentially august as president of the United States yet not lose track of who I am, what I believe in and what I want to do to serve?"

I was impressed by such a self-conscious and honest answer. To be president you have to put yourself forward and ask people to vote for you. You must have a huge ego to say to people that you are ready to take on this enormous job and you will do it well. On the other hand, you have to know that you can't do it yourself, to be humble enough to say you are not perfect, that you need advisers, helpers and staffers.

One must always be grateful for the position you have been given and never take it for granted. Clinton said she practices the discipline of gratitude to help her find the balance, that regardless of how hard the days are, how difficult the decisions are, that she is always mindful of knowing her limitations and not to be ashamed to reach out to people for support. That is an impressive leader.

The flip side is someone who does not have that balance and leans too much towards the ego without enough humility. One who constantly says I have done this, I know how to do that. One who spouts solutions and impossible fixes to complex problems, throwing out catch-phrases and inflamed rhetoric. But there is no substance because such an approach has no modesty, there is not enough collaboration or consensus building or questioning of the self. A great leader must be supremely confident to do the job well, but must balance it with humility and gratitude.

Does anyone here remember the biblical story of Pinchas, son of Elazar, son of Aaron the high priest. Most people won't remember him because, though he had potential as a member of the priestly class, he lacked the qualities of a leader and is not part of our lore of Jewish heroes. So what did he do wrong and where is his place in Jewish history. During one particularly difficult period of the journey from Egypt to Israel, the Israelites came upon the Moabite people and started fornicating with them and praying to pagan idols. God told Moses and Aaron to turn back the people from their evil ways and sent a plague among the sinners. This did not stop them. One Israelite man even brought a Midianite woman right into the centre of camp in front of the mishkan, the holy tabernacle. Pinchas was so outraged he ran forward and impaled the offenders with his spear. He felt that God would have wanted him to do this. As soon as the offenders died, the plague ceased and God said "I am appeased from my wrath due to the zealotry of Pinchas".

The rabbis however were very wary of this type of leader, who takes justice into his own hands, who thinks he knows what God wants. Even though the God of the bible is pleased, the overall message of our scriptures is one of peace and humility. Unlike Moses and Abraham, there are no great stories about Pinchas. There are no songs written about him and people generally don't name their children after him. In fact, when the Rabbis attached a haftorah to this portion, they took the story of Elijah the prophet from the book of Kings, the one where he was belittled by God. The mantle of prophet was taken from him and given instead to his protégé Elisha. The clear lesson is not to be overly passionate in your zeal for God or you will be removed from leadership.

Centuries later in the Talmud, Pinchas is condemned even further. He is compared to the zealots of Roman times, who so urgently wanted war that they killed any Jew caught negotiating peace and burned the

stores of food during the Roman siege of Jerusalem. We know the result of that war. The Romans crushed us, murdered the Jewish people, destroyed the Holy Temple and burned Jerusalem to the ground. What did the rabbis want us to learn? Beware of taking justice into your own hand, even in the name of God and religion. Temper your passion with righteousness and morality. Pinchas only saw one way, his way. He put himself above the community. He saw violence and fanned the flames of chaos. But our Rabbis continually turn towards leaders who seek peace and justice, who see the bigger picture and what is best for the entire community.

Who then is the hero from siege of Jerusalem during Roman times. It's Yochanan ben Zakkai. He saw the handwriting on the wall and wanted to find a new way. He knew he couldn't fight his way out, he understood his limitations but he also had a brilliant idea. He had his followers smuggle him out of Jerusalem in a casket, pretending he was dead. When he emerged on the other side he went to the Roman General Vespasian and humbly asked if he could leave with his followers to Yavne far off to the north in order to establish a center of learning. What must that Roman General have thought of a refugee who wanted a yeshiva rather than a revolt. Yochanan was given permission to leave and went on to compile the Mishnah. He saw the future and as a great leader he was humble enough to know he couldn't win the battle, but he could not lose the war for the survival of Judaism.

When I was in Dallas this summer, right after the police shooting, there seemed to be a dearth of leadership, but an unlikely cast of characters stepped into the breach. One of them, an African American named Ken Nwadike, arrived with his "Free Hugs Project" at a communal rally for peace led by a coalition of interfaith leaders. He began his project months ago at the Boston Marathon, holding a sign offering free hugs to cheer on the runners. Ken hopes that his 'free hugs' tour will help put an end to violence in America, by building a bond between police and the millions who watch his entertaining videos. He has shown up at political rallies, at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio and hugged a dozen Dallas police officers. Nwadike says in his videos "The way you find peace is you spread love. That love touches people's hearts." He is humble enough to know that hugs won't stop racial inequality but he is wise enough to not stand aside and do nothing. He's making an effort in his own unique way.

And the police are copying him. They're trying to touch people's hearts with kindness after a violent summer, whether it's dancing at a cookout with Black Lives Matter supporters or playing basketball with neighborhood kids. In Sanford, Florida, police are reaching out to the black community with surprise gifts of new basketball hoops. The department's Facebook page features videos of officers delivering new basketballs and backboards to families—and sticking around to play with them.

In Virginia there is an online viral video of cops doing random car stops and instead of handing out tickets, handing out ice cream. The video is sweet. Literally. And at a moment when tensions between police officers and communities of color are palpable, an officer offering an ice cream cone to a black driver presents a bit of relief. As Victoria Massie writes, "the surprise ice cream traffic stop was a part of building trust with communities". But community mistrust doesn't come from a lack of summer desserts. It stems from the systemic lack of ways to hold police accountable when they don't protect and serve, particularly communities of color. Police officers are leaders who every single day walk the line between showing appropriate force to uphold the law and humility to be just and compassionate. Ice cream will not solve racial problems, but at a time of great fractures, each little effort to put the pieces back together helps.

Being a good leader, and a good human being, requires a sense of balance. It could be in school, at work, or in your relationships – one is always trying to find a way to both express your thoughts and do what you think is right, by also acknowledging your limitations, and collaborating and listening to others. When we feel we deserve more than someone else, when our pride gets the best of us, remember we are but dust and ashes. (open pocket to reveal the two notes)

“Da mayayin bata”, remember we were all created the same, we are small bits of matter and have no reason to be excessively self-important. But when we are feeling discouraged, beaten down or unworthy, remember God teaches that the whole world was created for us. we have been given a life to enjoy, to make our mark, to seize hold of it and make positive changes and fulfill your unique purpose. Lets all try to Realize our potential to do good, bishvili nivra haolam.

The secret comes from knowing how and when to create a balance between humility and ego as we go through our life.

As you leave today I have prepared envelopes with these two notes in them, so you can put them in your pockets. And May we all have a sweet, happy and fulfilling new year.

Shana Tova