

The College Admissions Scandal: What Would a Kohen Do? Parshat Tzav 2019 / Rabbi Paul Steinberg, Congregation Kol Shofar

Mr. and Mrs. Rosenbloom were so excited they just had their first child, a brand new baby boy. Of course, like any Jewish couple, they were anxious about the birth announcement and wanted to have just the right language for telling everyone the name of their little newborn that also expressed their values. They decided upon the following brief birth announcement: "Mr. Marvin and Sarah Rosenbloom are pleased to announce the birth of their son, *Dr. Jonathan Rosenbloom.*"

Jewish doctors – we should all grow up to be one – no offense to the doctors in the room, whether you're an MD, PhD, PsyD, EdD, DO, JD, ThD, or DHL – that should, by the way, cover just about everybody in the room this morning. There are indeed 52, give or take, different types of doctoral degrees... so if you don't have one yet, I'm sure your Jewish mother is still worrying about you!

As Lenny Bruce, the great Jewish comedian once said – albeit controversially – So what if we Jews killed Jesus; he should've been a doctor.

For Jews in America, doctors – and thank God we can now talk about women as Jewish doctors, too! --- For Jews, doctors are the standard bearer of a good life and success in America. A doctor is a healer, a doctor is educated, a doctor is also ultimately pretty uncontroversial – a leader, but not in anything that would get him or her in trouble politically. Doctors fit in more than any other profession – certainly more than lawyers! ☺

I should stop here and say that my father is a doctor, and by that I mean an MD – an orthopedist – “a real doctor” (just kidding – he actually says PhD's are the real doctors).

But, what else makes a doctor the standard bearer of success? --- Doctors, meaning physicians – not PhD's in this case – make a nice living in this country. Indeed physicians make the highest median salary of any other profession in America today. ...At a distant second are pharmacists.

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I bring this up this Jewish doctor thing on one hand as a matter of Jewish pride, but also to bring awareness to something about it that may be a bit uncomfortable. At least for me, it brings up – yes, some very deep Jewish values about contributing to society in a positive way, getting a great education, and reaping the benefits of both doing good and a great education. On the other hand – going back to the birth announcement joke, it brings up a sort of superficiality, maybe, that our Jewish culture may have – or maybe not “superficiality per se” but anxiety, at the least, about not being successful and the uncertainty of what the next generation will achieve. I mean, if our kids grow up to be doctors, then we have nothing to worry about, right? Maybe?

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On March 14, just over a week ago, the biggest college admissions scandal ever was prosecuted in the United States. The list of over 50 parents involved, participated in varying forms of fraud in order to get their children admitted into elite universities. They included celebrities, as well as some folks from Marin. It's a stunning and harsh reminder that even those with wealth and privilege can cheat their way to greater and greater privilege. What's even more disturbing is that many believe that there is probably much more of this going on that has not yet been uncovered or prosecuted.

The rich, exemplified in the list of parents indicted last week – who spent what are estimates ranging to even millions of dollars to get their kids into these acclaimed schools – of course, already had the advantage over many less privileged by attending the best public and private schools, they had access to college advisors, specialized tutors, standardized test classes, prestigious recommendations, as well as other legal means to admission through legacies, or garnering favor by providing funding and donations to the school.

I just have to stop here and note that for once, we have a news story that's equally infuriating to both the right and the left on the political spectrum – *Yasher Koach!*

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So, enter the Torah. The Torah is a spiritual document, it's a historical document, it's a moral document, and it's even a political document all wrapped up into one. And when it comes to matters of wealth and power, the Torah is pretty clear: we take care of the needy and the vulnerable – and it's not called charity. Charity comes from the Latin word *caritas*, which means caring and love. Jews take care of the needy and vulnerable not because our hearts are moved to do it; we do it for *tzedakah* – for justice – that's literally what *tzedakah* means. It's simply the right and good thing to do, no matter how we feel about it.

Also, the Torah repeatedly warns us not to favor the rich and powerful over the poor; The Torah says that we should never take bribes from anybody; And it says that it's everyone's job to help take care of the synagogue – the high and low alike.

It says all of this and yet, there is clearly an elite and privileged class in the Torah, which is the *Kohanim*, the Priestly sect. But even with their privilege ... or maybe because of their privilege ... they are commanded to do things to keep them from abusing that privilege.

This week's *parshah*, in the book of Leviticus, describes the priestly order and the daily sacrifices they make. And yet, this esteemed, elite position of the *Kohen* – you know what the first thing they're supposed to do in the morning everyday? First thing? ... They take out the trash. They put on the daily work clothes – their daily, simple linens – and they have to take out the trash ... which was essentially the ashes from yesterday's sacrifices. Our *Etz Chayim Torah Commentary* picks up on this and sites a Hasidic teaching on this verse, which says that the reason the *Kohanim* have to take out the trash first thing in the morning is so that they never forget their link to ordinary folks.

Then, the next thing they do, as described in the *parshah*? They eat a sacrifice, which is called the “most holy” – *kodesh kodashim hee* – and you know what it is – it’s *matzah!* *Matzah*, and of course the rabbis pick up on this, saying that *matzah* represents humility, as opposed to the puffed up *hametz* and so, the *Kohanim* need to remain humble in their service.

What’s the moral of these teachings? Privilege and prestige and wealth must be counterbalanced with humility. Without humility, false pride and grandiosity will run rampant; without the restraint of humility, with no faith in a power greater than ourselves, we come to treat our own persona as a god – in other words, without humility our life’s mission becomes marketing our own personal brand and we therefore start to treat the most superficial, extrinsic aspects of our lives as most important, such as our title, and salary, and our public image. We start to treat our lives like our Facebook page, counting the “likes,” as opposed investing in the deepest, most intrinsic parts of our lives, such as our purpose and passion, how we express our personal gifts in a way that benefits the world, as how we connect to others and to meaning and to God.

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In 2006, Madeline Levine, a psychologist in Marin County published a best-selling book called *The Price of Privilege: How Parental Pressure and Material Advantage are Creating a Generation of Disconnected Unhappy Kids*. Levine based her book upon the kids she worked with in Marin, as well as some clinical studies, and what she found was that, although many of these teens had good grades, extra-curriculars – they were great on paper – they were also more likely to suffer from anxiety, depression, addiction, anorexia and to commit self-harm. Basically, she concludes that for privileged households, external accomplishments such as prestige, power, and money for adults, or grades, clothes, and electronics for kids, become more important than happiness, agency, and meaning.

I have to tell you that I have been working in Jewish education for 20 years and my experience, very much corroborates what Levine writes. I have asked kids what their parents would consider for them is a successful life and I get answers that list extrinsic, material things such as live in a certain house, drive a certain car, go to a certain college or sometimes their answers have to do with fame – one kid told me, a few years ago, that a successful life is getting on Oprah.

Then, I ask their parents the same question – what is a successful life for your kid –and the parents list intrinsic things like health, happiness, spirituality, love. Then I tell the parents what their own kids say and I ask why the difference? How is it that you are listing all of these beautiful ideals for your kids and yet they are getting none of those messages? Why the discrepancy?

I think the answer as to why the discrepancy may be found in what is possibly the most important finding Levine made – and certainly the most germane to the college admissions scandal – is perfectionism. That is, affluent and privileged households were much more likely to pressure both their kids and themselves to convey an image of flawless and

effortless perfection at work and at home and in society. And what we know is that that kind of perfectionism actually damages the self-confidence and development of children, and denies where real achievement comes from, which is hard work. Real achievement comes from hard work and hard work typically comes with failure and setbacks that we have to overcome, which is what makes it hard!

Brene Brown, a sociologist specializing on researching shame, writes, "Perfectionism is not striving for excellence ... perfectionism is not self-improvement ... perfectionism is not the key to success, in fact it hampers achievement ... Perfectionism is actually a form of shame and it is self-destructive and addictive" (*Daring Greatly*, 129-30).

The other thing that perfectionism does, which Brown doesn't exactly mention, is that it puts us in a mindset of catastrophic thinking or either-or thinking. Either this happens or it's all doomed. And there is an entire mythology around school and success based on either-or thinking and it goes something like this:

If I work really hard in high school, do all my homework, take as many AP's as I can, get a 4.5 GPA (4.0 is now clearly for morons), do 30 hours of extra-curriculars per week, then I can get into Yale or Stanford, from which I will graduate and immediately begin making \$500,000 per year and then all of this suffering will have been worth it. It's either that *or* I'm pretty much doomed to a life of flipping burgers.

Its either all or nothing, either heaven or hell, either perfection or utter degradation.

And this either-or myth founded on perfectionism is lived everyday by many families, with kids, parents, teachers, and school administrators all buying into this false narrative. Parents are no long merely helicopter parents, they're bulldozers, desperate for perfection they now bulldoze their way through for their kid; school administrators concerned about their own image are making policies according to this myth. And there is real, long-term damage being done to children based on what is ultimately a lie.

Kids are suffering with more academic stress today than ever with an average of 3 hours of homework per night in high school -why do you think we got so few teens for Purim? My own 13 year old couldn't dress up and celebrate Purim with her sisters because she was saddled with too much homework that was assigned that day. It's outrageous - don't even get me started on homework...

They're suffering from sleep deprivation - studies show that more car accidents among teens are from sleep deprivation than from drunk driving.

There are increases in addiction, suicidal ideation, eating disorders, depression and anxiety.

And with more academic stress comes more cheating - just like the parents in the college scandal - Over 95% of 11th and 12th graders admitted to cheating at one point or another and over 90% of 8th graders say they've cheated. They're cheating just to keep up.

But worst of all from the studies is that about 75% of adolescents are disengaged and don't care about what they learn in school. Either they are disengaged and don't care because they are too busy to engage, constantly obsessed with keeping up their high scores and record of achievement. Or they're disengaged because they believe that the whole system is absurd and it's pointless to even try – they know they can't live up to perfection – so they check out and often drop out (50% of high school students in the nation's largest 50 cities dropout; about a quarter of high school students in the state of California dropout¹).

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So what do you say to a stressed out kid who thinks that either they get into Harvard or they're doomed to "scrubbing toilets;" what do you say to stressed out parents trying to make sure they and they're kids are perfect because they're so afraid of what failure might feel like? What advice do you give?

I say be like a *Kohen* in the Torah. So...:

#1: take out the trash every morning. Treat taking out the trash as important ritual; honor the mess and know that you can clean it up if you need to. In fact, treat all ordinary chores as holy, spiritual practices. The meaning of the mundane may very well be the most powerful meaning we can tap into.

#2 Eat matzah. Eat matzah, not because it's Passover – it wasn't Passover when the Kohanim ate it – eat it so as not to spoil your tastes. Remind yourself that if something as simple and bland as matzah is good enough for God, it's good enough for you.

Also, practice gratitude. Count your blessings every single morning. That's basically what the priestly sacrifices were, gratitude practices. ... You can have wealth and privilege and affluence and yet, you will only deserve it if you are thankful for it everyday. If you are not thankful for it everyday, you're not worthy of it.

And remember that a the word human comes from the word *humus*. What's humus? It's dirt – earthy soil from which things can grow. BTW it's the same in Hebrew, *Ben Adam* is human being from *adamah*, meaning earth. Humus, earth, mud – that is what we are made of and it is where we will end up; and humus and human are so too related to the word humility. Humility is a grounded and earthbound conception of the self, and when you have humility, what you realize is that living a good and successful life has nothing to do with title, salary, or privilege – you don't have to be a doctor to live a successful life in the Jewish tradition. A teacher is actually the most prestigious profession in the Judaism. So yes, you can be a teacher, a counselor, a retail sales clerk, an artist, a pilot, a janitor, a nurse, even a rabbi, and live a perfectly good and successful life.

¹ See Alliance for Excellent Education Fact Sheet (2009) www.all4ed.org/files/GraduationRates_FactSheet.pdf; see also "High School Graduation Rates Plummet Below 50 Percent in Some U.S. Cities," Associated Press, April 1, 2008.

And, you don't have to go to Berkeley or Stanford to make it in the world! Almost no one lives a life where their trajectory is up and only up. No one in the Torah is perfect; all of our Patriarchs make mistakes. Success, however, is measured by how we learn from them – from our resilience and our grit.

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The best definition of success that I know – and I have a few I like – the best for me is by legendary college basketball coach and teacher, John Wooden: *“Success is peace of mind, which is a direct result of self-satisfaction in knowing you made the effort to do your best to become the best that you are capable of becoming.”* Notice that this is totally intrinsic – it's not measured by external factors, like wins or titles or salary. It's personal – you measure your own success, not someone else – and it's certainly not about perfection.

And finally, know that the rabbis teach: *Eizeh hu ashir? Ha-Sameach b'chelko* – Who is rich? The one who is happy with what he or she has. Just imagine if we all lived by just that one teaching. Just that one teaching, where everyone can be happy with what they already have. Imagine if we could just be happy with what we already have, what a more peaceful world we'd live in.

Shabbat Shalom