

ROSH HASHANAH I
5776

The rabbi of the congregation had serious surgery and was recuperating in the hospital. A nurse delivered to his room a large flowering plant with a card attached. The card read: "Rabbi, the congregation wishes you a complete recovery—a *refuah shelemah*—by a vote of 210-75."

In *Pirke Avot* (4:1) Ben Zoma asks: "Who is wise, who is strong, who is rich and who is honored?" He answers: "The one who learns from everyone is wise, the one who controls his anger is strong, the one who is thankful for what she has is rich and the one who honors others is honored."

Ben Zoma taught that a successful person is respectful, compassionate, thankful and humble; a set of values that stands in stark contrast to ours today. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel tells us that when he was young he wanted to be with clever people but as he aged he wanted to be with kind people. Do we regard, for example, a successful life as a life filled with kindness? When we tell our children and grandchildren that we want them to be successful, what do we mean?

Paulo Coelho writes: "Success comes to those who do not waste their time comparing what they are doing with what others are doing. It enters the house of the person who says, 'I will do my best every day to be the best person I can be.'" David Brooks recently wrote that we need to ask and teach our children to ask: "What is life asking of me? How can I match my intrinsic talent with the world's deep and urgent needs?" Are these questions we ask ourselves and send our children off to college with? Brooks shares his sadness that so many high school kids use stimulants like Adderall and cheat and only get a fraction of the sleep they need as teenagers. He says: "Kids need a place to breathe where they can tumble gently into sleep and dream." Too many of our children do not sleep and dream like this. What would Ben Zoma tell his children and grandchildren about success and how to pursue it?

Jeffrey Kluger tells us "In Praise of the Ordinary Child:" "Educators are saying enough! Somewhere between the self-esteem building of going for the gold and the self-esteem crushing Ivy-or-die ethos there has to be a place where kids can breathe, where they can have the freedom to do what they love." Kluger goes on to say: "We cheat ourselves, and worse, we cheat our kids, if we view life as a single straight-line race in which one hundredth of the competitors finish in the money and everyone else loses." The challenge for parents is to help their children understand that this is not true and why. Jessica Lahey, a veteran teacher, in her book, "The Gift of Failure," tells parents that they need to learn to let go so their children can truly succeed and that for our children to succeed they need to experience failure.

The novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie told the graduates at Wellesley College that their education may not help them be successful because their privilege can blind them. She told them to rethink what success is given how they have been privileged to attend such an elite school. She challenged them to not let their privilege blind them from seeing that success is being a compassionate person who wants to make our world a better place. Ben Zoma would enthusiastically endorse her message.

How many of us encourage our children to become teachers, social workers and yes, police. The author and law professor, Bryan Stevenson, says that if he could double the salaries of three professions immediately, these are the three he would choose. Rabbi Bill Lebeau told us from this bimah how he asked national lay leaders of the Conservative movement when they were complaining about low student enrollment at JTS if they encouraged their children and grandchildren to become

rabbis, Jewish educators and Jewish social workers. He asked whoever had done so to raise his or her hand; not a single one did. When as parents we speak to our bar and bat mitzvah children and praise them for all of their accomplishments and share with them how much we hope they will be successful, what are we saying? Is our intent to share Ben Zoma's wisdom and Rabbi Heschel's wisdom? Are we telling them that we want them to be kind, thankful and humble and if they are they will be extraordinarily successful? Or, do we mean something else by success?

The writer Steve Almond asks the question: "What makes a life heroic?" He says it is determined by the attention we pay to the purpose and meaning of life. Almond observes that our conception of the heroic today has become shallow. We worship athletes, moguls and movie stars who possess what we equate with success and happiness; our heroes today are those who are paeans to reckless ambition. William Woodsworth wrote: "The best portion of a good person's life is their little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and love." Ben Zoma would have liked Woodsworth very much.

The Salesforce. Com founder, Marc Benioff, spoke out about compassionate capitalism. He challenged other CEO's to consider how we can create a capitalism grounded in social justice. Have you heard of Sir Nicholas Winton Rubin? Marc Benioff would have had great regard for Sir Nicholas who died in July. He was a British financier and humanitarian who saved 669 Jewish children from Czechoslovakia in 1939 finding them homes in Britain. He never spoke of this for over seventy five years until shortly before he died. Sir Nicholas' success wasn't his wealth or his knighthood. His success was his compassion and his humility.

At a bris and now a baby naming, we place the baby in the Chair of Elijah the Prophet. Elijah is to be the harbinger of the Messianic era: a time of peace and justice for all. This mystical ritual is actually about parenting seeing that there cannot be adults who bring more justice and peace into the world if parents do not raise them to do so when they are children. Righteous Gentiles when asked how could you and your families do what you did when there were such great risks respond, regardless of what country they are from: "How could we not? It is what our parents taught us." This is extraordinarily successful parenting.

Raising Jewish children is not an outsourcing economy. Parenting is a preeminent mitzvah and as with many mtizvot it is very challenging. The barometer for success as parents is whether our child grows up to be an honest, caring and respectful person; in other words, a mentsh. They can also excel academically, athletically and financially. We can have successful children who do not excel in these but, we cannot have a successful child who is not a mentsh.

The journalist Ada Calhoun asks: "What is success in marriages, friendships and relationships?" "It is," she says, "our apologizing, forgiving and our trying and trying again." Paulo Coelho wrote: "I understand even if I were the most successful person in the world and the most desired, it would be worth nothing if I had no love in my heart; nothing." Being able to love is being rich; being able to love unconditionally is being very rich and being able to forgive and keep trying is being exceptionally rich.

The writer Alan Cheuse who died this summer wrote in "Prayers for the Living:" "Success is learning how to crash into one another and rebound from the impact; it is our knowing how to rebound and help others rebound from these impacts and the impact of when the external forces of life crash into us." Success is knowing how to rehabilitate a broken heart, how to not simply live day by day

superficially as so many of us do but to live deeply, think deeply and feel deeply. Success is being able to be self-critical and honest about ourselves. Are these the standards for success that we try to live by and teach our children?

Studies that Professor T.M. Luhrman of Stanford carried out show that 18% of Americans suffer from an anxiety disorder. We spend billions of dollars annually on anti-anxiety medications and a recent World Mental Health Survey showed that Americans are the most anxious people in the world. *Midrash Tanhumah* tells us that 80% of the Israelites that were in Egypt never left with Moses—80%! Why? Because they were too habituated to their lives; they were too busy being slaves to see the door to freedom. The Torah tells us that the Israelites in slavery could not catch their breath; many of us cannot catch ours.

We think that how we are living is what it is all about but in reality we are stuck in Egypt. The Musar teacher Alan Morinis asks: “Are the things we are doing with our lives worthwhile? Do they deserve our energy and time? Will they bring more light into our lives and the world? Will they make our lives more fulfilling and the world more peaceful? Do they make us more compassionate and giving people? For Jews, living successfully is living ethically. For Jews, philosophy, law, science and business without ethics do not matter. Being an observant Jew does not matter if one is not a compassionate and honest person.

For religion to be successful it needs to concern itself less with eschatology and dogma, less with triumphalism and holier than thouism, less with self-righteousness and know-it-allness and much more with the evil perpetrated by people with authority and power. Religion needs to be more concerned with issues of justice, racism, human trafficking, war, poverty and human rights if religion is to be successful. This is the post-modern litmus test for religions and religionists and too many of all faiths are failing the test. With all the wealth in our country and the world, sadly it seems at times as if we are becoming more impoverished every day.

For Jews success is being able stop each week for one day to experience Shabbat; to put our wallets away, turn off our computers and phones and sit down with family and friends to experience the restfulness and peace of Shabbat. The more Shabbat in our lives, the more successful we and our children will be because of what values Shabbat teaches us and what Shabbat does for family relationships and even for our physical and emotional health. Success is not only being able to move fast and do a lot of things; success is being able to slow down, even stop and smell the proverbial roses. For families success is to know how to spend time together, talk to and share with each other and experience the little and big moments of life together. Success is controlling our technology and not being controlled by it. Shabbat is a priceless gift that we need now more than ever. Understanding and appreciating this is success.

Success is being able to distinguish between what is important and what is not, what deserves our attention and what does not, what to invest our time and energy in and what not, what to spend our money on and what not. Success is not being afraid to be who we truly are, not being afraid to be emotionally vulnerable and intellectually open. For all of us but especially for those younger, success is knowing the importance of being with people in real time, looking people in the eyes, talking live, sharing emotionally; success is being able to listen to others and help bear their burden. The amount of failure in our society is astronomical; the amount of potential for success is even greater.

Rabbi Heschel taught that success is being able to see ourselves—each of us—created in the image of G-d and being the best possible versions of ourselves that we can be. Success is hearing the call within asking us where we are and being able to answer. Success includes knowing as parents and grandparents what we need to change as to what we are teaching our children and grandchildren about success.

Success is understanding that it is not important whether you are a banker or a grocer, a sports star or a truck driver; success is measured ultimately by one thing and one thing only: how much goodness did we leave behind when we die. A successful life is when it can be said about us not that we lived a good life but that we were good to life. Our rabbis knew that one cannot live a good life or achieve real happiness if one does not live an ethical and moral life. When we say that all we want for ourselves and our children is to be successful and happy, what do we mean? What did Ben Zoma mean?

So, the rabbi upon hearing that the vote in favor of his complete recovery was 210-75 understood that how successful he was as rabbi had nothing to do with votes but had everything to do with how compassionate, humble, honest and thankful he was. The same is true for each and every one of us.

SHANAH TOVAH