



March 14, 2024

Dear Friends,

Today, day #160, we honor the memory of those soldiers who died this past week and mourn the death of soldier Itay Chen, who died on that fateful day when the war started. Antisemitism across the world is spilling over into neighborhood protests, entertainment venues, and political settings with alarming frequency. It is becoming increasingly normative to find comments on the war far from the battlefield and in places we never expected them, like the Academy Awards.

Recently, however, we're also witnessing disturbing but isolated instances of internal hate speech that we need to call out before it gets worse. Students have approached me to discuss it, as have friends and colleagues. They are unsure what to make of tweets, posts or comments made by Israeli rabbis or educators - role models in Torah - that are political in nature. Posts that reduce complex issues into simple, aggressive, often sarcastic sound-bites that smear American and Israeli politicians, that trivialize the suffering of Gazans, or that call for more violence can harm the otherwise immense positive influence that such Torah figures have.

We are experiencing pain and hurt at our core - what the Talmud calls a "coercion of the heart" (BT *Shavuot* 26a). The war and antisemitism have placed an enormous physical, mental, and emotional strain on all of us. In these circumstances, coarse, belligerent language is understandable but rarely acceptable. We fail to do what spiritual leaders must do: help us maintain our humanity even in the most trying of times. Once we condone violence casually, we risk desecrating God's name and losing our own capacity for holiness. What we say affects what we do in war and in peace, as *Ethics of the Fathers* reminds us, "Sages, be careful with your words" (1:11).

In *Judaism's Life-Changing Ideas*, Rabbi Sacks wrote, "People who have suffered pain often respond by inflicting pain on others." This has implications when promoted by those of any

faith. People begin to associate religion with militarism and see vice where they should see virtue. "Religion," wrote Rabbi Sacks in *Not in God's Name*, "leads to violence when it consecrates hate." He advises throughout the book the need for empathy. "To be cured of potential violence towards the Other, I must be able to imagine myself as the Other."

This never means that we tolerate evil. Prominent contemporary philosopher, Dr. David Shatz, began his three-part Sacks-Herstein virtual class on Jewish ethics this past Tuesday night. Hundreds of people registered. You can find the recording of it here. Join us this coming Tuesday when Dr. Shatz will specifically address the problem of evil, a topic that has preoccupied us since October 7th.

This is a sobering time of anguish and introspection. What we need right now is nuanced, measured, thoughtful guidance on how to think about the current situation from military and political experts. What we need from our spiritual leaders is inspiration and hope. When the war is over - may it end soon and with victory - our words will remain as our character witnesses. We cannot be silent when we hear or read any words that besmirch the dignity of human life. Instead, we should remind each other gently about the better angels of our nature.

Shabbat Shalom,
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Pekudei 5784

Positive Accomplishments

Parshat Pekudei celebrates the culmination of the building of the *Mishkan*, the Tabernacle. After several lengthy chapters delineating the structural instructions and subsequent creation of the Tabernacle and vessels, the verse reports that “all the work of the Tabernacle of the Tent of Meeting was completed” (Ex 39:32). The verses explicitly state three times towards the end of chapter 29, that the Israelites did “just as God commanded” (Ex. 39:32, 39:42, 39:43). Moses reflected on the *Mishkan*’s implementation and the grandeur of the finished product and then blessed the Israelites. Gersonides notes that Moses behaved as a moral exemplar; a leader should always praise his people’s accomplishments. By doing so, he or she fosters a healthy sense of pride, which also enhances motivation for future success.

Celebrating accomplishments is an important value in human growth. In formulating his vision for the psychology of flourishing, Dr. Martin Seligman offered the acronym PERMA to represent five important areas related to happiness and well-being. “P” stands for positive emotions, “E” for engagement, “R” for relationships, “M” for meaning, and “A” represents accomplishment. Focusing on the latter, Pninit Russo-Netzer and Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar point out that accomplishment that leads to psychological flourishing is not about attainment of external rewards or the seeking of recognition from others, but “focuses on achievements that nurture the self and others academically, physically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually” (*Positive Education*, 2015). It is this type of intrinsic and holistic accomplishment that generates happiness.

Exploring the commentaries related to the completion of the Tabernacle, we are left with an inspiring model of accomplishment that parallels positive psychology’s meaningful conceptualization of the construct.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch directly connects the completion of the Tabernacle with happiness and well-being. Moses celebrated two important elements. First was the fact that “*they* had made it” (Ex 39:43). Everyone had an active role in its development. Each individual’s personality, devotion, and voluntary enthusiasm formed a broader, more cohesive collective. Second was the dedication and commitment to Divine command. Fulfilling the Divine will with such devotion, writes Rabbi Hirsch, leads one to an ultimate sense of unparalleled happiness, fulfillment, and moral elevation.

Noticing the nuanced shift in terminology from two words that mean work: *avodah* in verse 42, and *melakha* in verse 43, Rabbi Aaron Soloveichik distinguishes between the two types of work that were necessary in the construction of the Tabernacle. *Avodah* reflects the mindset and output of a servant. There is no space for creativity or individuality. To succeed in *avodah*, obedience is necessary. *Melakha*, however, “embodies the personality” of the worker. It entails autonomy and encourages individuality.

The successful balancing of this dialectic warranted celebration. There was both devotional *avodah* along with creative *melakha*. Moses encouraged contributions of the heart fueled by

intrinsic motivation accompanying individualistic artistic and aesthetic capabilities. And he also continually reinforced doing “just as God commanded.”

By analyzing the celebration of this remarkable achievement, we are left with a powerful formula for fulfillment and flourishing. Working towards meaningful achievements that utilize our whole selves, uniting to form a powerful social collective, while also fulfilling the will of God can lead to happiness. Moses praised the completion of the Tabernacle; this should inspire us to strive for and rejoice in the accomplishment of our goals and the goals of others.

Character Challenge: When you notice others accomplishing meaningful goals, take the time to praise and celebrate their achievement.

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks *zt”l*: “Celebration is an essential part of motivating. When we celebrate the achievements of others, we change lives” (“Celebrate,” *Covenant & Conversation*).

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