

Sermon of March 12, 2010
Rabbi Brad Bloom

We have seen in the popular culture of American life too many examples of how quickly one can destroy one's own reputation. To watch almost on a daily basis, the magnitude of personalities especially from the realms of sports and elected office who fall to their own demise is sad for the people, like many of us, who subscribe to the belief that achievement in public life deserves our respect and admiration.

Sexual escapades and financial chicanery seem to go hand in hand as the most effective cocktail for self destruction. What is always amazing to me, is how the intoxicant of being above the normal rules seems to be the consistent reason that people give for explaining why they felt justified for acting out their wishes and fantasies. What we find is that even the smartest and brightest in our society continue to trip themselves up time and again by succumbing to their own fragile moral constitution.

Maybe the inability to resist such temptations stems from something toxic about being the guardian of the community's interests. That authority to be the person everyone trusts and expects leadership from is not an easy pathway to walk on a daily basis. Yet if a person does not have the right kind of internal coping mechanism to balance out the reality from the fantasy then they are doomed to cross that line and self destruct. Finally when leaders lose their sense of humility they often head down the road to self-aggrandizement.

Judaism has always been concerned about the importance of a good name in the communal life. As a matter of fact, in this week's double parashah V'yakhel and Pekudei, Moses faced those same pressures of living within his means despite the status accorded to him by the people as prophet of God. What can we learn from our tradition about how best to understand the pressures that descend upon us when we hold high levels of responsibility?

The parashiyot are the last two portions joined together to conclude the reading of the book of Exodus. We find ourselves getting ready to dedicate the Tabernacle. This was the portable worship space for the Israelites, which they carried with them for forty years that contained the Ten Commandments and provided the basis for the sacrificial worship tradition.

The rabbis saw in the first words of the portion, "And Moses assembled the children of Israel," a clue to the issue of why one's reputation was so precious and so fragile being susceptible to even the slightest nuance of criticism. The rest of the verse goes into depth regarding the appointment of Bezalel, the chief artist and architect of the Tabernacle.

Imagine the pressure to stay above suspicion in this public process of creating institutions of communal worship. The integrity of the leadership team, in the bible for instance, Moses and Aaron, was critical for this process to be successful.

And so you may be asking, “Are you saying rabbi there were suspicions about the reliability and honesty of even Moses?” In the last part of the two portions, the Torah speaks about the accounting for the records of the Tabernacle. Our sages, of blessed memory, in one particular midrash say that when Moshe would go out into the Tent of Meeting which was part of the Tabernacle, the people would rise and proclaim in his presence saying the words according to Rabbi Isaac, “Blessed is She (the mother of Moses) who bore this man. All his days the Holy One speaks with this man and he genuinely belongs to the Holy One.

But according to another scholar, Rabbi Hama, he said that the people were saying, “Shame on Moses, look at the fat neck, look at the fat thighs. Moses is eating that which belongs to Jews and drinking from that which belongs to Jews, for everything he possesses comes from the Jews.”

Then an associate of Moses said to the people, “Would you not want a person in charge of the work of the Tabernacle to be wealthy?” As soon as Moses heard this, he said to them, “By your life after the Tabernacle is finished, I am making an accounting with you.” That is the reason for the verse of the Torah which says, “These are the records of the Tabernacle.”(EX. 38: 21) See how transparency in public policy goes back to the rabbinic midrash!

Even Moses was suspected of financial impropriety and resented for his position and prominence in the Israelite community. Just by the very nature of such notoriety do people become jealous and envious. It is very easy to fall prey not only to our own demons but also to the opinions of others who sit in judgment upon us.

I think that what public leaders, not just elected leaders, forget is that their success is based upon how they maintain the public trust in their hands. Sometimes that public trust is the elected office from which they rose in prominence. On other occasions, the public trust stemmed from what they achieved in sports, for example, the adulation of the fans. That kind of adoration is just as sacred as the respect one receives from high office. When I see great sports heroes fall from their positions of adulation due to financial or sexual schemes or due to medical abuses of themselves like performance enhancing drugs, we feel the blow to the national culture and one more degree of mistrust is etched into our hearts before we will trust another hero again.

What is missing in our society today is humility. We do not value humility as strength. We value the boisterous one who makes a drama on the football field. We value the star not just

because of how an athlete performs but how he or she behaves creating the necessary degree of drama that stirs up publicity.

We value colorful figures with charisma rather than the hardworking and effective leader. That is a tragic mistake in our priorities in measuring the quality of a leader today. Too often we look at the outer features rather than internal qualities that truly determine whether a person is worthy of emulation.

The bottom line is that when people who rise to the top in our society believe the publicity they themselves generate and receive, then the prospects for succumbing to those temptations becomes real. We need humility not because we should put ourselves down or not believe in what we want to do. It is about, rather, that we learn how to downplay our achievements so that we do not foster internal self-idolatry which creeps up into the psyche of the person.

What the people who achieve fame forget is that they convince themselves that they are the only one responsible for their success. They reject the idea that we all benefit from others who inspired us or helped us move forward in life. Fame and notoriety tend to isolate a person from the truth of their success. When that happens, the fall from fame is soon to approach, and as we know, there is always a person or group of people ready and waiting to pull the leader down.

We need to foster leadership models that value humility in all aspects of our society and reward achievement not only in the skill itself but also in the attitude the person displays about their skill. We need more humble leaders who value less the limelight and but who can direct us to the hopes and dreams of others as examples of what we can all achieve.

When our society builds a Tabernacle whether it is the sports arena, the concert hall, the movie screen, or the legislative capitol, the real heroes combine not only the physical strength but also moral strength. The truth of success comes in not just what we do but in how we achieve it and how we demonstrate it to the public who valued it in the first place.

I suppose that is why Moses avoided further criticism because he did show financial expertise and humility for himself as well as for the people he served. He mastered the intricacy of the finances and still showed humility. He is a symbol and model for our times as well. Humility is still the most precious trait of a true hero.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Brad L. Bloom