

Optimizing Disappointment – Rosh Hashanah 5778 Day II

Many of you will know that I'm not the world's biggest sports fan but it's hard not to be just a little bit enamored with the success of the incredible Theo Epstein! Even the non-die-hards amongst us are aware of how Epstein was able to turn around two hard luck teams, our own Chicago Cubs and my hometown's beloved Boston Red Sox, breaking both the 86-year Curse of the Bambino and the 71-year Curse of the Billy Goat while giving the Cubbies their first World Series title in 108 years. Many of us still can't quite believe we lived to see the day!

Epstein was recently interviewed about how he has been so effective at building up otherwise mediocre franchises into powerhouse empires, and his answer might surprise some of us. Rather than pointing to money-ball statistics or razor-sharp competitive drive or clarity of vision or work ethic or any of the many other fine attributes with which the executive has (rightly) been credited, Epstein instead pointed to how he makes selections during the draft and to one attribute, in particular, which influences his player choices. What Epstein wants to know most about his guys, more than their height or weight or batting average or win shares number, is how they handle adversity, and he gets at this metric through the following eight questions which he expects his scouts to answer:

1. Give three examples of how the player handled adversity *on* the field.
2. Give three examples of how the player handled adversity *off* the field.
3. What is the player's family situation like?
4. How does he treat people when no one is looking?
5. How does he treat people he doesn't necessarily have to treat well, perhaps people who have been unfair to him?

6. What do his friends say about him?
7. What do his enemies say about him?
8. What motivates him – is he mostly externally motivated (i.e. money, Twitter followers) or is he internally motivated?¹

Epstein explains that baseball is built on failure; even the best hitter strikes out seven times out of ten. And so rather than only trying to optimize winning, he also seeks to optimize losing – choosing players that have sufficient emotional, ethical, and spiritual resources that they will carry the athletes through not only when things go right but especially when they go wrong. Epstein decided that he needed to start his team with the basics and by this he didn't mean hitting or pitching. He built the Cubs based on character.

Theo Epstein may well have transformed major league baseball with his emphasis on eight insightful questions, but he certainly wasn't the first to recognize that how one handles adversity is often a mark of her true character. In fact, when we look at the Scriptural readings chosen for these three sacred days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we notice a veritable litany of human suffering, individuals placed in impossible circumstances and forced to make heart-breaking decisions. Infertility. Marital conflict. Abuse. Trauma. Parents forced to watch the near deaths of their children. Husbands taking new partners before their wives' very eyes. If these characters were potential recruits being scouted out by Epstein, how would they measure up? Let us imagine their draft-pick notes:

What is the player's family situation like?

¹ <http://fortune.com/2017/03/23/theo-epstein-chicago-cubs-worlds-greatest-leaders/>

Abraham Avinu left home at an early age and has had sons with two different women, recently throwing his second partner and her child out of the house at the insistence of his wife. In a moment of religious ecstasy, he near slaughtered his remaining son but claims to have been called off at the last moment by a Divine reprieve.

How does he treat people when no one is looking?

Jonah the Prophet tends to avoid situations that make him uncomfortable, shirking responsibility and running away when he believes that no one is watching.

How does she treat people she doesn't necessarily have to treat well?

Peninah is known to taunt her husband's other wife, Hannah, claiming that the infertility which already devastates the woman so is actually a punishment from God.

And yet....

How does the player handle adversity?

Abraham is a man of empathy who has been distressed by the ill treatment of his second family. While he is perhaps a bit too quick to listen to Authority, he is brave and obedient and willing to sacrifice for the principles he holds dear.

What motivates her?

Hannah has an unshakeable spiritual core and, despite rumors to the contrary, finds solace in meditation and prayer rather than substance abuse or other vices. She wishes for a son, not for her own self-aggrandizement, but rather to dedicate the child to God's service in order to leave a lasting legacy.

What do his friends say about him?

Isaac, son of Abraham, was wounded by a trauma that has left him and his father estranged.

Nevertheless, rather than choosing a path of bitterness or rage he has simply put distance between himself and his family and hopes to reconcile with them one day.

I will be the first to admit that the famous figures of our Torah and Haftarah readings do not always make what we would consider good choices. I would have much preferred for Abraham to stand up to God and refuse to sacrifice Isaac; for Sarah to push through her envy and embrace Hagar and Ishmael as members of the family; for Jonah to accept the Divine mission rather than fleeing to Nineveh. I'm not sure that any of these individuals really would have passed Epstein's character test. Their decisions are deeply flawed.

And yet, I believe that these stories were chosen for these days not necessarily because of the responses of the individuals involved but rather because of the difficulty – and also universality - of these characters' plights in the first place. The Binding of Isaac – We are torn between competing sets of needs and values and struggle with which to choose. Sarah and Hagar – We are forced to watch others get the very things we most desire. Jonah – Just as we're in the midst of following a course we've selected for ourselves, circumstances barrel in and force us down a different path.

In life, as in baseball, there are so many things that don't go quite the way that we would have hoped. How we handle adversity often becomes the mark of our true character.

The High Holidays, for many of us, are a time to take stock, recognizing and expressing thanks for life's many blessings. Over the past year couples have met and fallen in love, gotten engaged, and stood under the *chuppah*. Babies have been born. *B'nai mitzvah* and graduations and special birthdays or anniversaries have been celebrated. This past year many of us have found success in our professional lives, securing new jobs or promotions, being recognized with awards or grants or publications, feeling the profound sense of gratification and fulfillment that comes from working hard at something and seeing it bear fruit. We've enjoyed the company of dear friends. Some of us have learned new things or traveled to new places. Over the past year, there are those amongst us who have experienced healing from serious injury or illness, who have come back from significant financial loss, who have witnessed the repair of important relationships. *Baruch Adonai Yom Yom* – For all these things, and so many more, we are most grateful.

Along with the blessings of 5777, however, there have also been terrible and painful moments of struggle. We have lost people that we care about. We have seen our minds and our bodies fail us. We have been passed over for opportunities, or even had them taken away from us in the first place. We have watched the suffering of people that we love. Our hearts have been broken, our egos bruised, our feelings hurt. We have grown apart from people we were once close to. We have felt under-appreciated and under-valued. We have been jealous. We have wanted things that we can't have. We have worried about money. We have worried about our children. We have worried about plenty of other things too. We have been lonely. We have recognized that elements of the life we once imagined for ourselves may never quite come to be. Life is full of tremendous joy and satisfaction, and it is also - at times – so very, very difficult. Part of our job as human beings is not only to optimize success but to optimize disappointment as well.

And so, we arrive at Rosh Hashanah, our annual opportunity to play the role of recruiter and examine the state of our own character. Of course, the High Holidays are not meant to be the only time during which we reflect on the kind of person we are and the kind of person we most wish to be; ideally, the tasks of introspection and self-improvement should happen continually, as part of a regular practice of working on ourselves and constantly striving to do better. And yet, there is something about the sanctity and solemnity of the season that suddenly makes this effort seem all the more urgent and essential. We go back to the basics and give ourselves a fresh start.

At a High Holiday class I attended last week on *teshuvah* – the sacred return that is at the heart of the High Holiday season – my teacher, Rabbi Shai Held, spoke about the simultaneously inspiring and dispiriting nature of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. These days are inspiring, of course, because of the potential they usher in – for transformation, for repair, for new beginnings, for lasting and meaningful change. And yet, as Held pointed out, most of us wake up on the 11th of Tishrei, the morning after Yom Kippur, not so very different from the person that we were prior to the holidays. Even after these long hours of intense psychic focus, it can feel that relatively little has shifted. True change is enormously hard to accomplish.

Held posits, paradoxically, that it is for exactly this reason that religion was born, that – in his words – “the spiritual life takes place in the space between what’s difficult and what’s impossible.”² For work that is quite easy we don’t need to urge and agitate ourselves; for work that is truly hopeless there is nothing we can do. But where there is possibility for improvement, however remote or arduous to achieve, Judaism beckons us to try again. Indeed, that is what the High Holiday season is all about.

² Shai Held Lecture at BHBE, September 14, 2017

I'm not sure that there is any particular magic to Epstein's eight questions, although they certainly have served him well at achieving tremendous success on the ball field:

How have I handled adversity?

What is my family situation like, the important relationships in my life?

How do I treat people when no one is looking?

When I don't actually have to be kind to others, do I choose to be so anyway?

What do people say about me?

What are my motivations and are they really the right things?

And, of course, there are so many other questions we could add as well:

Have I been generous with my time and with my money?

In a broken world, have I worked for justice?

Do I let the people that I most care about know that this is so?

How honest am I with myself about my strengths and my shortcomings?

The Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 31a contains six questions that all us, supposedly, will be asked before entering Heaven and includes amongst others:

Did you deal honestly in your business practices?

Did you make time for Torah study?

Were you sure to enjoy all the permitted delights of the world?

To these, Rabbi Ron Wolfson has famously added a seventh question asking:

Were you the best *you* that you could be?

At the end of the day, the questions are not nearly as important as the answers. There are so many different paths towards finding *teshuva*.

On this sacred day of Rosh Hashanah, I wish us all a sweet new year in which our blessings and successes will always be optimized. And may our deepest disappointments be optimized as well.

Shana Tova.