The Power of Grit

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Prominent scientists have just announced that, as a result of the global warming phenomenon, an uncontrollable flood would soon devastate Planet Earth and bring death to every living being. There were only three days left before doomsday.

The Chief Rabbi of Israel goes on international radio and says: “Fel­low Jews, we must all accept the will of God with humility. We must prepare ourselves to meet our Maker and pray that God may receive us with love and compassion.”

The leaders of the Hasidim address their communities and say, “*Yidn* (fellow Jews), let us do *teshuvah*and repent from our sins, and let us be prepared for the great Day of Judgment, at which time we will appear in the presence of the Court on High.”

The science and biology students of the universities of Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa, the Negev, together with the leading scientists of the Haifa Technion and the Weizmann Institute, immediately go on the air and say, “Fellow Jews, everywhere, we have heard the terrible news, and we must not waste any time, for we just have three days to learn how to live under water.”

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“Just three days to learn how to live under water.” This could have very well been, “Just three days to learn how survive COVID-19.” It hit us all so fast that we didn’t have much time to figure out what to do. We are in uncharted waters and it feels unsettling for us and our families. Judaism teaches us that we need to teach our kids how to swim, an obvious metaphor for learning how to cope with challenges that come our way. For those flexible and spontaneous people, this might have reassured you that change is the only constant in life and it was time to figure out this new challenge. For those who like consistency and are not fans of change, this was a nightmare. What are we supposed to do in these unchartered waters? We all responded in ways that complemented our own personality style and we continue to do as the pandemic doesn’t seem to be going away anytime soon. Indeed, we live in strange times.

In conversation with a rabbinic colleague of mine, we discussed the possibility that God might have been so disillusioned with the world that state of the world and how each one of us contributed to state of our world. Could this have been a test, possibly even of Biblical proportions, to see how we would respond? On April 8, 2020, The Jerusalem Post published an article entitled, “Coronavirus and the 10 Plagues.” The article states, “Perhaps G-d has stopped us now because we are at a critical juncture in human history. We are not Pharaoh threatening a people. We are potentially far worse. We are people threatening the entire world order and all for the wrong reasons. So perhaps G-d has had to intervene, to say “Stop!!!! Hit reset. Don’t be Pharaoh. You are going the wrong way. You cannot afford moral irresponsibility anymore. Respect life. Respect nature. Respect freedom. Because if you don’t you could destroy it all, and that’s not a chance I can take. So I will plague you, as I did Pharaoh, to restore justice and balance to the universe, to reset your values and free those who cannot free themselves. I will plague you to save you if you do not save yourselves.” I don’t know if we are Pharaoh or Egypt, but one thing is certain - G-d has stopped our world like He stopped theirs. We have retreated to the safety of our homes from a hostile environment, just as they must have done to escape lice, frogs and beasts. And the plagues didn’t stop in Egypt until Pharaoh stopped. When he stopped the persecution of others, when he prioritized basic spiritual and human needs over prosperity and pleasure, he was freed.

I have not been able to escape the reset button. For months now, my mind has been spinning in circles. Is God testing us now? Is this our generation’s turn? Maybe we can learn from the possibly most well-known tests in the Torah, Akedat Yitzchak, the Binding of Isaac. It so happens to be the Torah reading for Rosh Hashana. Genesis, Chapter 22 has troubled me for years, but now it holds a different meaning for me during this time of COVID.

וַיְהִ֗י אַחַר֙ הַדְּבָרִ֣ים הָאֵ֔לֶּה וְהָ֣אֱלֹהִ֔ים נִסָּ֖ה אֶת־אַבְרָהָ֑ם וַיֹּ֣אמֶר אֵלָ֔יו אַבְרָהָ֖ם וַיֹּ֥אמֶר הִנֵּֽנִי׃

Sometime afterward, God put Abraham to the test. He said to him, “Abraham,” and he answered, “Here I am.”

Hineini, “Here I am.” The word is used only 14 times in the entire Torah and of the 14, three of which are mentioned here in our story. Hineini is more than just, hey God, I am here. What’s up? It is a readiness, a willingness to go about and accomplish a goal and is something we do with passion. Some might even call it grit.

God puts Abraham to the test and it isn’t the first. In fact, tradition teaches that this was the tenth in a series of tests. God tells him to, “take your son, your only one, the one that you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you.” As a person of faith, but even more so as a son, and as a father, I have always disliked the fact that God would want us to offer our children as a sacrifice to prove faith and loyalty. No parent would want to, or have to, sacrifice their own child, even during the messy world of virtual schooling!

No sooner did they set out on their journey does Issac challenge his dad. He says, “Hey Dad,” to which Abraham responds by saying, “Yes, son, here I am.” The second appearance of Hineini. “Dad, here are the firestone and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?” “Don’t worry son, God will see to the sheep for his burnt offering,” and וַיֵּלְכ֥וּ שְׁנֵיהֶ֖ם יַחְדָּֽו, and the two walked off together. Isaac is not blind. He sees something is wrong and challenges his father. Come on Dad. We have done this before. Isaac knows how the sacrificial ritual is done which means he expected them to be prepared. No sacrifice? No sheep? What’s going on? Something is wrong.

They arrive at Mt. Moriah and before Isaac could even respond, Abraham builds the altar, binds him on top of the wood, lifts the knife, and…Just before he brings the knife down on Isaac to kill him, an angel appears and calls out, “Avraham, Avraham,” and he replies, “Hineni,” here I am. The third time Hineini is mentioned. The angel tells Abraham not to touch the boy. “I know that you fear God as you were willing to offer him up to God.” Abe then sees a ram caught in the thicket and offers the ram as a sacrifice. It is amazing how the ram seems to appear at the most interesting of times. We then read, “Abraham named that site Adonai-yireh.” Yireh could mean one of two things, fear or vision. The passage hinges on what this word means. I suggest it means vision, or even more so, clarity and understanding.

Abe indeed has vision, but it seems that up until this moment, that vision has been somewhat blurred. Avraham thought he knew what he wanted. He wanted to believe, to have faith and purpose. He wanted to feel like his life had meaning and that God had called him for a special purpose. He was obsessed and in his passion he seems to have lost his way. The Medieval French Commentator Rashi explains, perhaps God was saying, “When I said to you ‘Take your son’… I did not say to you, sh’chateihu, ‘slaughter him,’ but only ha’aleihu, ‘bring him up.’ Now that you have brought him up, introduce him to Me, and then take him back down.” In other words, give him faith and belief. Let him see the beauty of God’s world. Love him deeply but sacrifice him? You got it all wrong.

In Rashi’s reading of the text, Avraham totally missed the point and seemed to fail the test. This was an awakening for him. Without the right vision, we can lose our way and as a result, make decisions which are not in our best interest, which take us off track. God has given us the power to make decisions which can shape our lives and create worlds. We can’t always control what happens to us, but we can control the way we respond. Innate talent means nothing if you lack vision and the passion to make things happen. It is as if God is asking us, “How gritty are you? How hard are you willing to work for the good life?”

The difference between talent and grit was the subject of a major study by University of Pennsylvania Professor Angela Duckworth and was published in her book entitled, *Grit*. When she left her job with a management consulting firm to teach 7th grade math in the New York City Public schools, she was fascinated by how her less talented students outperformed her most talented kids. As a result, she decided to get a degree in psychology and focus her research on talent vs. grit. When do people give up and when do they strive to achieve their goals? What is the psychology behind it?

Her studies prove, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the most successful people in the world may or may not have talent, but they do have immense grit. They never give up. They are focused and don’t make excuses as to why they are unable to accomplish a task. Grammy Award winning musician and actor Will Smith says, “I’ve never really viewed myself as particularly talented. Where I excel is ridiculous, sickening work ethic…you might have more talent than me, be smarter than me, you might be sexier than me…but if we get on the treadmill together, there’s two things: You’re getting off first, or I’m going to die. It’s really that simple.”

Duckworth studied everything from the National Spelling Bee to West Point Military Academy, and she found that those who make it are the gritty ones, the people who have the passion and the perseverance to make it happen. So, how much grit do you have? Duckworth believes that grit is partially genetic and partially learned behavior. Everyone can have grit, passion, and perseverance. You just have to work hard enough and, unfortunately, too many people give up before they even get started.

Our very own Sandi Gansel’s dad, Ernst Gansel, was a survivor of the Dachau Concentration Camp. He was born in Vienna and his father died when he was a year old. He wrote a letter to Sandi on Sept. 15, 1990. It reads, “On November 10, 1938, now known as Kristallnacht, I was arrested and taken to various police stations, jails, and prisons. Not to go into detail, by Nov. 15, 1938, I found myself in Dachau with thousands of other Jews. I was kept there until Feb 27, 1939. Because of my age, the three months there where not as bad for me as for many others. Being the youngest at the camp helped me.

Little did I realize that the best years of my life were yet to come. God was really good to me and I never doubted that I would survive. My mother and I came to this beautiful America on April 7, 1939. The rest is history. It Is now 51 years later and my life has been blessed in so many ways. Your mother, the love of my life, my three beautiful daughters, my 5 precious grandchildren and of course Mark, whom I really love like a son. What more can I want in my life. I am not looking back on all the bad things that happened to me. I still consider myself the luckiest man in the world. Do not look at the letter from Dachau as something of tragedy, because for me it was the beginning of my life. Always remember that you come from a long line of survivors.

I love you always. Daddy.

Speaking with Sandi about her dad, she shared with me that her dad served in the US Army, was wounded in France, and met Sandi’s Mom on a 3 day leave in England. He was a self-taught aeronautical engineer and he designed the rescue lights for the Mercury and Gemini Space programs, as well as the rescue lights for downed helicopter pilots in Vietnam, all of which are on display at the US Air and Space Museum. When he died on February 6, 1995, he left behind 3 daughters, 5 grandchildren, and 6 great-grandchildren.

For Sandi, dad’s life and legacy can be understood in five powerful lessons:

1. Particularly for Sandi- Always say YES when a boy asks you to dance, it took courage;

2. Never cry over anything money can replace;

3. When you make a mistake, find and learn a lesson from it;

4. When making tough decisions ask yourself, what you have to lose, it's not about what you have to gain; and

5. Never go back and finish a drink, start with a new one.

Ernst’s grit and passion for life guided him to create a new life in America, one that would pave the way for his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren to have a better life than he had growing up in Vienna. He realized that one can view any challenge we come across as a curse or a blessing. He chose blessing because that is the way he could create a more positive future for him and his children. Nothing was going to get in his way.

That is what Jewish life is all about. Whether it is COVID, or any other challenge that stands in our way, we can view it as a curse or a blessing. Temple Kol Emeth itself is a study in passion and perseverance. In 1982, seven families decided to create a Reform Jewish community here in Cobb County. Under the leadership of Rabbi Lebow for the past 34 years, the TKE community has committed itself to raising the next generation of Jews and being the home for Reform Jewish life in Cobb County. But, we can’t take this for granted and must continue to create and innovate to stay relevant. We must ask ourselves the difficult questions. What would happen if Kol Emeth disappeared like so many other synagogues across the county? Would the East Cobb community miss us? Would they feel the void? What do we stand for? What do we need to do not just to sustain ourselves, but how can we be relevant and attract the next generation? If not now, when?

Let’s be honest. The future of synagogue life is not guaranteed. Synagogues are getting smaller and closing across the country largely due to lack of ability to stay relevant, to inspire people to live their best lives. The successful synagogues are ones that are able to engage their community and make sure that new families are coming in to join. They are ones with enough grit to make sure that their communities are leading the way to create new, inspiring, and innovative expressions of Jewish life. They are ones able to build coalitions in their communities, partnering with other faith-based institutions to create a support system and webs of interconnectivity. We need you to make this happen. We need you to be gritty with us, to get out of your comfort zone and build the future together.

In the Hebrew bible, three times a year the Israelites would travel to Jerusalem to be together as a community: Sukkot, Passover, and Shavuot. During the rest of the year, they would study and pray, have meals together and support one another in each other’s homes. Both of these scenarios are critical for the community to survive. These small groups carry the load together, bearing each other’s burdens and caring for each other. They needed each other and so do we. We want connection and real relationships in our lives. We all know that we will never get real with each other before we know each other. If you are real with others, we can help you build lifelong friendships. All this happens in community. Today, we come together as a large community, imagine this as that gathering in Jerusalem. While we will provide continued community programs for the rest of the year, the real relationship building will take in small groups that we will help you to create. **Community and living life together is a huge part of our tradition.**

So today, we are harnessing our communal grit and creating Chavurot 2.0: TKE Life Groups. We are going to build a network of people throughout our community to create these small groups to make our community stronger. If you want to help lead this initiative, if you are an influencer and love to bring people together, we want to hear from you. We are creating a leadership network of people who are willing to create the first set of groups. Between October and December, we will train this new leadership team and in January will roll out a variety of groups to meet everyone’s needs. Not to worry, we will have trimesters for our groups. So, you can stick with your group if you are enjoying it or can join another group that might have a different focus. You might be interested in a young marrieds group that could be called The Meaning of Marriage Group or maybe a Couch to 5k group. What about Friends and a Fire Pit group, or a Journey to Wholeness Group. Maybe you would be interested in a Parenting Beyond Your Capacity Group, a Torah stories for Parents Group, or a “Stepping Up” Men’s group. You might want to be a part of a Women’s Empowerment Group or a prayer or study group. The possibilities are endless and the results will transform our community.

The key to success will be our grit, the willingness for all of us to work together to make sure our community is strong and secure for the future. “If you build it, they will come.” But, you might be saying, “This is nice, but someone else will do it. It doesn’t need to be me.” On this Rosh Hashana, let us ALL make a commitment to one another. Bring your passion. Bring your perseverance. Bring your honesty. Say Hineni, here I am! I am ready to lead a group or join a group. Together, let’s create some serious energy and show the power of TKE Grit!

L’Shana Tova u’metukah…for a good and sweet year!