

SEABISCUIT: A Lesson in Fixing Each Other

Rosh Hashanah Morning 5764

When I was a little boy, invariably I would be the last one to arrive to the dinner table. I was, I presume, usually preoccupied with something or other. Television. Games. Toys. And when I finally did make it into the kitchen, as I approached the table my father and then brother would welcome me, “And here comes Seabiscuit.” The truth is I had forgotten all about this until reading Laura Hillenbrand’s book and seeing the subsequent film version of *Seabiscuit*. As a child I had had no idea why the greeting, “And here comes Seabiscuit.” (Nor I think did my brother.) It just seemed like a funny name. We had a lot of those funny names in the Kushner household of the 1950s. Whenever the family spoke of some proverbial town in the hinterland, they would call it “Paducah.” I used to think it was just a funny sounding, fictional town until, in 1974, I went to Paducah, Kentucky as the student rabbi for one year. (I even told them how my family would use their town’s name in family humor, but they didn’t find it so funny.) We Kushners were quite adept at making up funny words, too. Like *fafoofnik*, a name given to young children and *boompa*, the name my father took for himself upon the birth of his first grandchild. It was to no surprise then that I would conclude that “Seabiscuit” was just another of those funny names.

In time, of course, I learned that there really had been a Seabiscuit, a race horse. They even made a movie about him starring Mickey Rooney and Shirley Temple. But even then, I presumed that it was just a funny sounding name. No, it wasn’t until I read Laura Hillenbrand’s book that I came to appreciate the phrase, “And here comes Seabiscuit.” For you see, Seabiscuit—perhaps the most legendary horse in American horse racing history—invariably came from behind. When the horses would break from the starting gate, Seabiscuit would hold back, stay inside the pack, even run behind it. Then, as the horses would approach the final turn Seabiscuit would make his charge. Everyone knew it would come. It was his trademark style. And as the caller would describe the race, you just knew that sooner but probably later he could be counted on to exclaim, “And here comes Seabiscuit.”

But even had I known the history of the phrase and the reality of the thoroughbred after whom it was named, it still wasn’t until I read the book that I understood why, so many years later, Seabiscuit’s name was remembered. It wasn’t until this past summer, when the news of the soon to be released film version was being proclaimed, that I chose to read Ms. Hillenbrand’s book. And it was then that I understood. I understood why she wrote the book. I understood why my family remembered the name of this virtually mythical horse. Because his story—which is clearly more than just the tale of a horse—is among the most inspiring stories of courage and determination. And, of course, the fact that it is true is what makes it that much more powerful.

The story of Seabiscuit is not merely the story of a race horse. It is the convergence of several lives, animal and human, giving credence to the popular maxim that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Yet even more is that each of those individual parts would share one thing in common: They were all flawed. They were all damaged goods. As the one line from the film which was used in most publicity put it, “We’ve got a horse that’s too small, a jockey that’s too big, a trainer that’s too old, and an owner that’s too dumb to know the difference.” In fact, their actual imperfections were even more glaring.

Red Pollard was not merely too big for a jockey, he was an alcoholic. Raised in an educated middle-class family, he was forced to make a go of it on his own as a teenager when the family lost everything in the Depression. He was a failure as a prize fighter and not much better as a jockey. It was the stuff of Greek tragedy for a young man who could quote Tennyson and Shakespeare at the drop of a hat.

So, too, trainer Tom Smith was a journeyman cowboy, out of his element in professional horse racing. He related better to horses than to human beings. He was the embodiment of the real lone ranger.

And the owner, Charles Howard, for all his financial success, truly understood that money could not buy happiness in the wake of the tragic death of his adolescent son and the subsequent failure of his marriage.

But it was Seabiscuit, who looked more like a carriage horse than a thoroughbred, whose knees could not lock into place, who slept too much and ate too much, who had been beaten as a colt, that was the symbol of this motley crew.

Individually they were aimless, going nowhere, without direction, wandering without a sense of purpose. But together they formed a remarkable team, capturing the attention of a nation at a time when it was needed most.

I know a little about that time. The 1930s. The Great Depression. People were desperate for anything to lift them out of the hopelessness of the times. These were the years of movies—from talkies to Busby Berkely to the magical color of the *Yellow Brick Road* in the Wizard of Oz. These were the years of radio—from mysteries and comedies to professional sports. Indeed, the 1930s, despite the economic and social challenges, saw Americans coming together like never before. And Seabiscuit, perhaps more than anything else, was at the lead. When it came time for the long awaited race between the underdog Seabiscuit and the consensus champion War Admiral, even President Roosevelt suspended his business as usual to listen to the race. They say more people listened to that race than any event in the history of broadcasting up to that time. Seabiscuit won going away.

It's at the end of the film, though, where the insight into this remarkable story comes through. The narrator, reflecting on Seabiscuit's mystique, comments that "Seabiscuit fixed us." That is, this otherwise undistinguished looking horse helped to repair the damage these four individuals had had to bear before Seabiscuit came into their lives. Then, having considered the impact those three men had on Seabiscuit, he concludes, "Actually, we fixed each other." And it was at that point that Marilyn leaned over to me in the theater and said, "This is going to be a High Holy Day sermon." I hate it when she does that.

Indeed, I was intrigued by the notion that we could fix each other. What if, I thought to myself, each of those characters was destined to find each other—for no other reason than to fix each other? What if they were destined to come together to help fix the nation? What if we are all here for the expressed purpose of fixing someone else? And what if I'm wrong—but we just go about pretending that I'm right, anyway?

Ultimately our life journeys revolve around the question: What is my purpose? Why am I here? But so often we get bogged down with the awareness of our shortcomings. Our failures. Our imperfections. And that takes us off track. We wonder, "What good can I be with this problem?" But maybe that's the whole point. Maybe we're supposed to be flawed. Besides, how interesting would life be if everything were perfect?

The truth is, there's not much in the Torah that would suggest otherwise. From Adam and Eve's inability to follow simple instructions, to Cain's killing Abel, to the generations of Noah and the Tower of Babel, the Torah cuts right to the chase. To be a human being is to be fraught with problems. We rebel. We're arrogant. There's no way around it. Even the heroes of our tradition—Abraham, Miriam, Moses—all have basic human flaws. And that is precisely the point. *Human* flaws. To be a human being is to be imperfect. By definition. That is what keeps us from being God.

On some level we have to embrace our imperfections. I'm not so sure we have to—as some would say—*love* our flaws, but we must take ownership of them. And affirm that this is who I am. Warts and all. Yet by the same token, it is our ability to rise above our flaws, to transcend those imperfections that the potential for our humanity is understood. We *can* improve. Albeit we believe that as human beings we are prone to failure and making mistakes, we also believe that we can resolve those flaws through the performance of *mitzvot*. Ours is an inherently optimistic tradition.

Hence, when confronted with the fact that the jockey Red Pollard is blind in his right eye, owner Howard responds, "You don't throw a whole life away just because it's banged up a little." Everyone

has value. Everyone has a purpose, even if they're more than a little banged up. Indeed, perhaps one's ultimate purpose is to help someone else repair their own imperfections.

In essence the point here is simple: We cannot fix ourselves *by* ourselves. We need help. We need others. One of my favorite Hasidic stories is the tale of the man lost in the forest. No matter how many times he tries to find his way out, he always ends up somewhere in the forest. Then he spots another man. Rushing up to him, the lost man exclaims, "Thank God I've found you. I am so lost. I have no idea how to get out of this forest." The stranger responds, "I hate to tell you this but I'm lost too. But I can tell you where I've been, which paths not to take. Perhaps you can do the same for me. Then, together, we can find our way out and then home."

Relationship is the conduit to salvation. We each need "significant others." Not simply in the way we think of lovers and partners but in the way George Herbert Mead originally intended the phrase. Namely, "...one who signifies or reflects back to us the meanings of our gestures and, in doing so, develops with us our ability to act meaningfully with others." In other words, someone who can help us see the things we cannot see. Someone who helps us be our better selves.

The key to such a theology of relationship, however, is not to try and fix everyone else. God knows we have enough friends and relatives who feel so destined. There's nothing worse than someone who thinks he's on a mission. Rather, the goal must be the forging of relationships of mutuality. In their book, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham write of such an emotionally and spiritually symbiotic relationship. "Mutuality involves not just 'give or get,' nor even 'give and get.' In relationships of mutuality we give *by* getting and *get* by giving, recognizing that we truly gain only what we seek to give and that we are able to give only that which we are seeking to gain." It might sound a bit circuitous but that's because it is. It requires a willingness to need someone else's help in order for us to help another. It necessitates an openness to someone else.

David Wolpe tells the story of a father and son who are walking along a road when they come across a large stone. The boy says to his father, "Do you think that if I use all of my strength, I can move this rock?" The father answered, "If you use all of your strength, I am sure you can do it." The boy began to push the rock. Exerting himself as much as he could, he pushed and pushed. But the rock did not move. Discouraged, he said to his father, "You were wrong. I used all of my strength but I still can't do it." The father put his arm around his child and said, "No, son. You didn't use all of your strength. You didn't ask me to help."

Is it too much to think that maybe this is the way God has planned it? Is it too far fetched, does it require too much suspension of the intellect to act *as if* others are destined to help us grow and we are here for no other reason than to help someone else master their imperfections? My brother Larry captured this notion of being a *bashert* for someone else beautifully in his book *Honey From the Rock*:

"No one has within themselves all the pieces to their puzzle. Like before the days when they used to seal jigsaw puzzles in cellophane. Insuring that all the pieces were there. Everyone carries with them at least one and probably many pieces to someone else's puzzle. Sometimes they know it. Sometimes they don't. And when you present your piece which is worthless to you—to another—whether you know it or not, whether they know it or not, you are a messenger of the Most High."

The Sufi relate this very truth: "Past the seeker, as he prayed, came the cripple and the beggar and the beaten. And seeing them, this holy man went deeper into his prayer and cried, 'Great God, how is it that a loving Creator can see such things and yet do nothing about them?' And out of the long silence, God replied, 'I did do something about them. I made you.'"

Could my existence be merely for my own gratification? Did God bring me into this world for no other reason than just to be happy? Or am I here for something—or *someone*—else? Of course, there is no way to truly know. It can only be a matter of faith. But what is faith except a foundation of operative principles. "These are the things upon which I act. These are the presuppositions which direct my life." Would it be asking too much to act *as if* I exist not to make *my* life better but to help another become someone else's destiny? Is this such a bad way to live a life? Could we envision a universe with such an intricate design? To imagine a world where we all, in some extraordinary way, are connected? As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. put it, where "...all life is interrelated...where all [people]

are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." I can think of worse ways to conceptualize the meaning of life.

At the end of Woody Allen's *magnum opus* "Annie Hall" he tells the following joke: "A man walks into a psychiatrist's office and complains that his friend thinks he's a chicken. 'Why don't you leave him?' asks the psychiatrist. 'Well I'd like to,' he replies, 'but I need the eggs.'" Despite all our *meshugas*, we still need the eggs. We even need the *meshugas*. Our relationships, our ability to fix each other, are what makes life worth living.

So it came to pass, in those dark and dreary years of the 1930s, that an almost forgotten horse of noble blood and three lost men found each other and helped to raise a nation out of the forest and see the light, if for just a brief moment in time. But maybe that's the way God had planned it all along. Indeed, for all we know, God has similar plans for us.