

Soccer Parents, Soccer Goals and What Really Counts

*Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
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It is more than just an aphorism to state that life as we know it will never again be the same. Time, will now be measured in terms of before September 11, 2001, and after. Two weeks later, it is still hard to get the horrific images out of our mind. And perhaps, we never will.

I just received an e-mail the other day from a friend of mine, a Miami dentist who assisted the forensics unit of the medical examiner's office in New York with body identifications. He wrote me, "the most difficult part is the family. When the family folder is opened after the identification is made and a letter is read that says, 'If you find my daddy, give him a kiss and a hug for me.' That is truly the most difficult time of all. The magnitude of this disaster cannot be measured in the numbers of dead, but in the destruction of families."

No, life will never be the same again. Things that once seemed trivial are now important, and what once seemed important now seems to be insignificant and inconsequential.

Our whole perception of who is a hero and definition of what is a role model are fundamentally changed, hopefully forever. We will not look at firefighters the same ever again. Actors, models, and rock stars all seem irrelevant. We will not take our flag for granted. We have a new sense of unity and purpose. We will look at our neighbors with suspicion and distrust, and think twice before taking a trip or boarding an airplane. And the goodbyes we say to loved ones when leaving for work in the morning will take a moment longer, and come from a deeper place in the heart.

It is hard to believe that I recently came across an article in my file from just two short years ago, by a *Washington Post* columnist who commented on the lack of problems facing this generation. He lamented that there were no new challenges confronting society. Yes, it is hard to imagine that it was not so long ago that we deluded ourselves into believing that utopia may be around the corner. We certainly have lost our naiveté about the magnitude and depth of evil that some people are capable of harboring.

So, how do we pick up the pieces and go on living after a tragedy of such tremendous magnitude?

For one, we take solace in the many beautiful stories of heroism and of sacrifice on the part of so many. We are inspired by their acts, for we hope that we would make the same kinds of courageous choices. In telling and retelling the stories, we give immortality to those who perished. By identifying with the brave fire fighters and policemen, by uniting as a nation, we show which side we are on. We display our flag to show our allegiance to the principles of America and to fortify our resolve and determination to overcome the evil that sought to destroy us and which took so many lives. In little ways,

we seek to defy the terrorists so consumed with hatred, and to deny them victory.

The juxtaposition of recent events and the prayers we recite at this time of year may prod and guide us to do what Yom Kippur is intended to achieve. We understand better the need to heed the call of the Days of Awe to reach out to others and, to loved ones. We more profoundly appreciate the fragility of life. The underlying messages of this season now fall on more receptive ears. Indeed, we each live our lives a little differently. At this time of year we realize that the loved ones we think about during the holidays, those we either are with, or whom we long to have beside us are what really counts.

Yom Kippur is a day which calls upon us to appreciate how fortunate we are to be alive, to assess the way we live our lives, and reflect upon what about ourselves we need to change. The purpose of this day is to help us realize that as humans, God has endowed us with the unique power to change our fate and destiny, and to alter the choices we make and the way we live our lives. By taking stock of ourselves, we affirm our humanity, for being human means that we are different from all of God's other creations.

Rabbi Abraham Twersky at the lecture he recently gave at our synagogue said that we are the only living creatures who can reflect on our goals and decide upon our aspirations. Unlike other living organisms, we alone, can make conscious choices to improve our moral lot and to seek to become better individuals. We can defer and postpone things to a later time, because we realize the timing of a particular act is inappropriate. We are the only living creatures who can decide to satiate not only our own needs, but who think of others by doing acts of hesed. We are given advice and guidance on this path and the choices which confront us by the wisdom of our tradition. On this day, we affirm that we have a connection to each other, to our past, and that we can change the kinds of people we are.

And while this ability to strive to change ourselves and determine our destiny is an attribute shared by all people, it is a characteristic especially embraced by Judaism and affirmed by our holy days. We are constantly reminded of our mission, to be messengers of God. Not to impose those values on others, or to carry out any kind of holy war, but to exemplify through our lives the noble teachings of our heritage, to be a blessing unto the nations, and to strive for tikun olam, to make the world a better place.

Yes, our world is different, and that includes of course, the fact that our economy is also different than it was before. A friend sent me an e-mail the other day which said that if you bought \$1,000 of a particular stock a year ago, it would now be worth \$ 49. If you bought \$1,000 of Budweiser, however, the actual beer, not the stock, drank all the beer, and then redeemed the cans for a nickel each, you would get back \$ 79.

Our concerns about life itself are now so markedly different than they were two short weeks ago. We now worry about security and safety in a way which once was so distant for us. What seemed to be a concern of others, in far-away places has now entered our consciousness.

But as life begins to return to a routine, if not necessarily, normalcy, we need to be careful not to be overcome and consumed by fear. We need to concentrate our energies on the kind of world we want to live in, and the kind of people we want to be. We need to focus on the kind of values we believe in, and what it is that we want to pass on to our children.

And hopefully, people have been reassessing their lives, reflecting upon how to integrate this new reality.

I have been thinking about these issues a great deal, even before the events of the last few weeks, prompted, in large part by an article I read in the *New York Times* several months ago. It is an example of the kind of behavior which needs to be reevaluated. The article opens by describing what happened to Jovan Lazarevic, a 6 foot 2 high school teacher and former soccer referee. He decided to quit refereeing soccer games after two angry fathers and the losing coach approached him after a game, as he was about to get into his car. Among other things, the coach kept shouting at him, "You cost me the game."

It was not the first time I heard of the growing concern about what some are calling "sideline rage" -- parents yelling and jeering at their kids' athletic games. The National Alliance for Youth Sports reports an increase from 5 % five years ago to 15 % of games involving some sort of verbal or physical abuse from parents or coaches. In Massachusetts, one parent beat another to death. Clearly, things are getting out of hand.

Some speculate that parents have lost sight of the purpose of high school sports, and that it may be driven by parental desire for their kids to get sports scholarships. Others attribute it to the emulating of the belligerent behavior of some professional sports figures so prominently featured in the media. Parents may be under the mistaken impression that they help their children by sheltering them from experiencing defeat.

One of the problems may be that parents, themselves do not know how to deal with defeat.

But as I said before, life is different before and after September 11, 2001. One minor example, which I still find remarkable, and which typifies the cataclysmic nature of the change in our country is what happened last week at the Philadelphia Flyers – New York Rangers hockey game in Philadelphia. The fans demanded that the President's speech be shown on the TV screen in the arena, and wanted to watch it until the end. When the speech was over, rather than resuming the game, the players agreed to leave it a 2-2 tie, and here is the amazing part, they then all shook hands. That may be the only time this ever happened in the history of professional hockey!

If only the parents so intent on shielding their children from defeat would learn what these hockey players now understand. Sometimes we can win without winning, and there are more important things in life.

The *Times* article referred to a bitter court case in Miami where parents filed to force a replay of a girls softball tournament game, because they contended that two players had been disqualified due to a computer error.

There is a level of intensity about this stuff that is misplaced. Dan Doyle, executive director of the Institute for International Sport, said, “When I was playing sports as a kid, there didn’t have to be an end product. You were playing for the joy of it. But the way things have been set up, there’s this sense of advancement now.” It is more than just the competitive desire to win, which is driving these parents. It also cannot be explained by the vicarious living of our fantasies through our children. It is all this, and more. And the malady is not confined only to parents of children who play sports.

It has to do with a lack of values, or of valuing the wrong things, of not understanding what is really important in life, and thinking that we serve our children’s best interests by sheltering them from failure.

I know of instances in which parents argue with teachers in defense of their children, without ever pausing to consider that their children may be at fault. How different from the way most of us were raised. I remember as a kid, I used to sometimes wonder whose side my mother was on, since she always assumed I was wrong, and defended the teacher. Now, much later, I realize that in so doing, she really was on my side.

We want so desperately for our children to succeed, that we make the mistake of making it seem as if they are never mistaken. Thinking that they are incapable of learning from their mistakes does not improve self-esteem, and does little more than produce narcissistic, self-centered children who will not be able to function when they will confront their first failure or challenge. Although parents give lip service to the importance of values, too many do little to teach the importance of caring and sharing, and do not consider the ramifications of this approach.

Just a little more than a year ago, in our own community, the pressure put on educators to produce high test scores led to a situation where teachers were coaching children and giving them the answers to standardized tests. Fortunately, the children spoke up, when they realized there was something wrong about this dishonesty and deception.

Don’t people stop to consider if they would prefer to have a doctor who exercises good judgment, or one who was at the top of his class and did well on his exams, but, because he got a little extra help.

What are the results of the kind of fanatical parents described in the soccer article?

Perhaps it is no coincidence that the two most famous Jewish women in our country today are named Monica and Chandra. Mary McGrory in a column in the Washington Post pointed out that something was askew with Chandra Levy’s values and the circle of relatives around her, singling out for criticism the aunt to whom she confided about the

affair she was having. Rather than steer her in a different direction, point out that what she was doing was wrong, or suggest she break off the relationship, she advised her how to keep her boyfriend interested. This is the product of an attitude which says -- do whatever works for you, and the absence of integrating the Jewish teachings of our tradition into one's value system.

Barry Chazan, an Israeli researcher who studies contemporary Jewish and moral education says that "traditional Jewish education was aimed at helping the child to see, accept and perform the good life rather than to 'realize' or 'express' himself." Judaism teaches us that the journey we take and how we walk the path of life is what really counts, not the box score or the final score.

A survey conducted by the Family and Work Institute of New York, reported in Time magazine in 1999, asked 1,000 kids between the ages of 8 and 18, "What one thing do you wish you could change about your parents' work affecting your life?" Most parents assumed that children would say they wanted them to spend more time with them. But only 10% did. The most common wish, expressed by 34 % was that parents would come home less stressed and tired by work.

So, I urge us all, on this day of reflection, to stop and consider how we are living our lives, and what messages we are giving our children.

We read a litany of sins, so that we can find what is most applicable, and what about our own character we need to work on. The shortcomings are all of an ethical nature, and are meant to cause us to stop and think about how we live our lives, and what we need to improve or change. Concentrating and focusing on the prayers and liturgy we recite today reinforces these values.

Just the other day, on our way to shul for Rosh Hashana, my younger son, Noam asked me if he could play football on Rosh Hashana afternoon with the neighbors. I told him, "Noam, I could understand your asking this question if you had not spent a year in Israel, if you did not attend the Jewish Day School, and if you were not the son of a rabbi. You tell me, what do you think the answer should be." He thought for a few minutes and said, "How about if I wait until about 5 pm." I said, "NO, absolutely not. You may not play football on Rosh Hashana." There was no reaction, just silence. I assumed what I said was sinking in. After a few minutes, he punctuated the quiet by asking me, "How about basketball?"

Too few parents are willing to say no to their children. And too often, religious school, services, or Judaism take a back seat among the things we emphasize as being important.

Allow me to share with you a personal story which illustrates the kind of choices a child makes when raised to think of others and of what it means to be a part of an eternal people. Some of you may know that my oldest son, Ezra is presently attempting to go to Israel to serve in the IDF, the Israel Defense Forces. Although his future is not yet certain, and he may or may not be accepted, he told me about the experience he had when

there this past summer, leading a Birthright Group. One day, when they were in the North, they came across a group of young soldiers, about his age. He described how tired they all looked, not having slept for several days. And then he said, "I looked at them, and thought to myself, I am no different or better than they are. How can I let them sacrifice and go through this, and say that I am any better than them, and not be a part of it."

As a parent, you can imagine, I have mixed emotions about what he wants to do, and it is not yet certain if he will be accepted. But I cannot help but feel a sense of pride in his selflessness and idealism, his sense of community and purpose, and in his devotion to his people.

The greatest gift we can give our children is to learn one of the core messages of Judaism – that we should be concerned with the community, and not just ourselves and our own needs. I come back to one of my basic themes: The greatest treasure you can give to your children is the rich heritage known as Judaism.

I will never forget what a man in his early 60's told a group of rabbis last year when we visited his kibbutz on the front line of the northern border. A man in his early 60's told me and several visiting rabbis. "If I am asked by my friends in America what I will have achieved in life, I will not be able to show them my stock portfolio, or my new car, or a beautiful house. But I will be able to point to my kibbutz, and what we have built here. I will point to the country I have helped to build, and to the way of life we have created. And I will be proud." This is what it means to live life with a purpose, and to care about more than the outcome of a kids' soccer game.

The last speech Rabbi Alexander Schindler was scheduled to give before he died suddenly last November were these inspiring words:

"To be a Jew is to be something more than a survived endangered species. To be a Jew is to be a goad to the conscience of humankind, to bear a heart of flesh and blood and not of stone.

To be a Jew means to weep where there are tears and suffering.

To be a Jew is to be part of the civilizing and humanizing force of the universe.

To be a Jew is to defy despair though the Messiah tarries.

To be a Jew, as God told Abraham thousands of years ago, is to be part of a great and enduring people, Yes, but also to be a blessing to all humankind.

This is the heritage and legacy we should bequeath to our children. On Yom Kippur we are reminded that every day we should seek to bring Judaism into our lives, and to live by its teachings.

I came across a cute story about two friends watching an old movie. One says to the other, "I'll bet you \$ 5 that John Wayne is going to fall off his horse within five minutes." Sure enough, he falls off, but the friend says he can't take the money, since he already saw the movie. The fellow who lost the \$ 5 protests, saying, "That's ok. I saw it, too."

So the first guy asks, “So if you already saw it, too, then why did you bet?” He explained, “I didn’t think he would be foolish enough to make the same mistake twice.”

Well, this is the time of year we can rectify what we do, and try not to make the same mistake twice. We play the tape again, and like the new dvd’s, we can change the ending and alter the outcome. It means we have the chance to think twice about how we talk to others, how we treat other people, what we should value and cherish.

Let me conclude with a beautiful story about a wise woman who was traveling in the mountains and who found a precious stone in a stream. The next day she met another traveler who was hungry, and the wise woman opened her bag to share her food. The hungry traveler saw the precious stone and asked to woman to give it to him. She did so without hesitation. The traveler left, rejoicing in his good fortune. He knew the stone was worth enough to give him security for a lifetime. But a few days later he came back to return the stone to the wise woman.

“I’ve been thinking,” he said, “I know how valuable the stone is, but I want to give it back to you in the hope that you can give me something even more precious.”

“What could that be?” asked the wise woman.

And the man said, “I would like for you to give me what you have within you that enabled you to give me the stone.”

Living in the shadow of our new reality, and heeding the call of this day, may we take these lessons to heart, and know the treasure of the value of sharing and of not being afraid to let our children, or ourselves fail. Let us reaffirm what is precious and what truly matters in life.

*Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt 2001
Congregation B’nai Tzedek
Potomac, Maryland
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potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org*