

My Advice to My Child as He Enters the Working World

*Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
Yom Kippur 5765 - 2004*

Several years ago I stood before you on the High Holidays and delivered a sermon entitled “My message to my oldest son, as he was about to leave for college, my youngest son, who was about to start first grade, and to myself.” The sermon dealt with what I wanted to impart to my oldest and youngest children as they each embarked on a significant new chapter in the journey of their life, and about how difficult, yet necessary it is for me as a parent to let go. With a lump in my throat, and a tear in my eye, I said that I recognized that from this day forth, things would be forever different. From now on, whenever my son came home, he would come home as a visitor. The sermon touched many and hit a responsive chord. I even received a personal hand-written note from President Clinton telling me how moved he was by my talk, as he identified with it, since his daughter Chelsea had also just left for college.

In the spirit of Yom Kippur, I must confess and admit however that I was wrong. What I said about children coming back after college as visitors is not true. The truth is -- they move back in. (Actually, it is only temporary, but I couldn't resist such a great line.)

In the interim, in these past few years, my oldest son, Ezra graduated and worked for a period of time before going off to serve in the Israeli army, returned and did fundraising for his comrades in the IDF. He recently started his professional life in earnest. As a result, I have been thinking about what words of wisdom I want to convey to my oldest son and my other children as they enter the working world. I would like to share it with you today, for it is applicable to all of us, as it pertains to how we approach our jobs, our occupations, and life itself – which after all, are all matters appropriate for us to reflect upon on this holy day.

In theory, the message is really rather simple and straightforward. The difficult part is the implementation and putting it into practice. It has to do with balance and perhaps not too surprisingly, the overriding importance and centrality of Judaism, especially since its wisdom and insights are so practical, enduring and helpful.

The great philosopher Maimonides taught in the 1200's that a person should divide his time equally between study of Torah, earning a livelihood and necessary physical activities, such as eating, sleeping, and so on. His advice is still relevant and applicable today. What he really was saying is that our work should not become all-consuming and take over our lives. Like the Talmudic sages who preceded him, he recognized that work is an important and essential part of life. Judaism does not sanction asceticism or withdrawing from our world into an isolated, insular cocoon of torah and prayer.

A famous story in the Talmud is critical of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai precisely for withdrawing from the world and living in a cave. He is roundly condemned for not

comprehending how important it is to God and the welfare of the world for human beings to work and create. We are considered God's partner in creation, and perform a sacred task by completing what He started.

It is an ongoing challenge, however, to find time for things other than work. This issue of the struggle to achieve balance is illustrated in a fascinating way in one of my favorite discussions in the mishnah. Specifically, the question is asked in the context of laborers whose job it is to prune trees, and what they should do when it is time to say various prayers. Should they come down from the trees, in order to say the prayers? Perhaps they should just stay in the tree, and pray while up there. But then they would confront the problem of not concentrating during their prayer, or conversely, of concentrating, but then they would be potentially endangering themselves. The point of this fascinating discussion which took place about 2,000 years ago is that we need to find a balance -- (in this instance) literally, but also figuratively between conflicting demands. The rabbis recognized the challenge and the need to integrate the two -- our work world and our spiritual world.

We learn from these writings that we have to work at balancing the needs of family, personal life and spiritual endeavors. Maimonides is saying that we need to find time for the holy and the spiritual, and to incorporate all of these elements into our lives.

So my advice to my children is to be sure to set aside time for study of torah, for prayer, as well as for relaxation, physical fitness and leisure. One way to achieve this, of course, is through the discipline of not working on Shabbat or the Jewish holidays. Setting limits reminds us of the divine role and liberates us from becoming slaves to our jobs, while bringing holiness into our lives. (But this alas, is a topic deserving a separate sermon.)

Finding a balance between a professional life and recreation, spirituality, family, community, volunteerism and everything else that pulls on us is difficult. While there is no simple formula which works for everyone, the point is to be sure not to spend all of one's time occupied with one's occupation, and not to let it dominate your life.

This does not mean one should not strive to excel. Take pride in doing your job well. Work hard. Always do your best. Be thorough and give it your all. The Talmudic discussion I referenced earlier goes on to ask: if the workers do come down from the tree, are they entitled to still be paid for the time they are praying, or is this on their own time? The Talmud was the first legal code in history to recognize that a worker has certain basic rights and made clear that an employer cannot exploit the laborer. Yet it also held that a worker has certain obligations to his employer.

Strive to be successful at what you do, but let that success not come at the expense of others. When you compete, be fair and consistent with the thrust of our tradition. I am reminded, for example of the story about the two men who had gone camping in a national park. Much to their dismay, when they woke up the next day, they found a bear approaching them. They started to flee the area, and the bear gave chase. One turned to his comrade and said, "Quick, we have to outrun the bear." The friend said, "Not really. All I have to do is be able to outrun you."

Too often, people approach life as a competition. Treat all, regardless of their position or status with decency and respect, and keep in mind that everyone is a creature of God, created *b'tzelem elohim*.

While the New Testament takes a different view, our tradition asserts that there is nothing inherently wrong with making money, or even being wealthy. The point is how we do it, what we do with it, not to let it become the overriding driving goal in life, and not to let pursuit of money blind us to ethical and moral imperatives. Society is littered with the reputations of those who became so avaricious in their pursuit of a few extra dollars that they lost sight of right and wrong. Enron executives, Martha Stewart, Leona Helmsley – the list goes on, have all become synonymous with unbridled greed and a lack of values. You would think that at some point we would get the message.

Numerous studies point out that increased happiness does not derive from increased net worth. It depends more on how we feel about what we earn. My colleague Mitchell Wohlberg points out that just before last Pesach, Jay Leno renegotiated his contract with NBC. Every night nearly 2 million more people watch the Tonight Show than David Letterman's show. In fact, 15% of all of NBC's profits come from The "Tonight Show." Jay Leno is paid well for what he does. He makes \$16 million a year. So, after the announcement of his new contract, Leno was asked by reporters: How much of a raise did you get? Leno answered, "Sure I got a raise. But the truth is that at this stage of life, I don't really need the money. If you can't live on what I make in my present contract, there's something wrong with you."

It is all the more interesting because not only does David Letterman get paid \$ 31 million a year, but two years earlier, he had threatened to leave CBS because he was *only* making \$30 million a year, which came to \$150,000 an hour! What Jay Leno was saying is that there comes a point when you have enough, and if you are wise and if you are healthy, then when you reach that point you realize it and behave accordingly. Jay Leno knew how important it is to say, "Enough is enough."

So I want you to know son, when enough is enough. If you happen to be fortunate enough to make what Leno makes, \$16 million a year, *genucht*, it will be enough.

Furthermore, keep in mind the big picture. Happiness does not stem from how much we make, or what we have, but from how we feel about what we have. Two stories illustrate this point. One is about a wealthy father who wanted to teach his son to appreciate their position in life, so he took his young son to a poor family's farm. After they left, he asked his son, "Did you see how poor people can be?" The son said he had indeed learned a lot from the trip, and replied, "I saw that we have one dog and they have four. We have a pool that reaches to the middle of our garden, and they have a creek that has no end. We have lanterns in our garden and they have the stars at night. Our patio reaches to the front yard and they have the whole horizon. We have a small piece of land to live on and they have fields that go beyond our sight. We have servants who serve us, but they serve others. We buy our food, but they grow theirs. We have walls around our

property to protect us and they have friends to protect them. Thanks Dad, for showing me how poor we are.”

The other story is told about an American businessman who visited a coastal village in Mexico. He is sitting at the pier, when a fisherman in a small boat docks, and inside the boat are two yellow fin tuna. The American asked the fisherman why he didn't stay out longer to catch more fish. The Mexican said that was all he needed for his family. “So, what then,” the curious American asked him, “do you do with the rest of your time?”

The fisherman answered, “I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, take siesta with my wife, and stroll into the village each evening where I sip wine and play guitar with my amigos. I have a full and busy life, *senor*.”

The businessman, a Harvard MBA grad suggests that the fisherman would be much better off financially if he spent more time fishing, caught more fish, bought a bigger boat, used the profits to develop a whole fleet and cannery. He could then leave the coastal fishing village and move to LA or New York where he could oversee the whole enterprise.

He told the fisherman that this business plan could all be accomplished within about ten to fifteen years.

“But what then, *senor*?” asked the fisherman.

The businessman explained, “That's the best part. When the time is right, you announce an IPO and sell your company for millions.”

“And then what will I do, *senor*?”

“That is when it gets really great,” the businessman continued. “You retire to a small coastal village, where you can sleep late, fish a little, play with your kids, take siesta with your wife, and stroll into the village in the evening, sip wine and play guitar with your amigos.”

Despite how our secular society admires and worships celebrity and wealth, Judaism teaches that the most important thing is how the wealth is accumulated, and then what is done with it.

How you treat those who work with you; for you; or who are your competitors; how you treat customers and clients, as well as those who choose not to become customers and clients – all of this is crucial, and the reason why when we meet our maker the first of four questions presented to us will be: *Natata v' nasata b'emunah* – did you deal fairly in business?

In other words, be sure that Torah is not relegated exclusively to the province of Shabbat or confined to the domain of the synagogue. Rather, it is an all-prevailing system of ethics and way of life which should guide our actions at all times, especially in the

marketplace. The reason prayer and study are so important and we set aside time for them is to place us in a community and link us to our people and heritage. We encounter and learn what it is that God demands of us, and thereby strive to live by those teachings, so that they become incorporated into our everyday encounters with others.

The Biblical injunction to have fair and equal weights is one fundamental principle, upon which many of our ideas of fairness in the marketplace are built. The Torah forbids merchants from having different weights for fear that one might unintentionally deceive another. Trust is at the very foundation of human interactions. Deception and ruthlessness in business are to be shunned, for one's reputation and good name are priceless and more important than a quick profit.

The importance of honesty in our dealings with others is illustrated by a beautiful story in the Talmud. It is about a rabbi who bought an animal from another person who was not Jewish, and discovered that unbeknownst to the seller, the animal was wearing a chain which contained an expensive, precious jewel. Rabbi Simeon ben Shetach could have easily been justified in keeping the jewel. He did not attempt to rationalize the other man's loss and his gain. Instead, he went and told the seller what had happened. As you can imagine, the Talmud looked favorably upon the transaction and praised the man for his honesty, integrity and trustworthiness. In fact the story says the gentile was so impressed with the honesty of this God-fearing man, that he himself decided to convert and become a Jew.

As George Burns once said, "Honesty is everything. If you can't fake that, you have nothing."

How we act towards others is a primary concern of Judaism. How you treat others will affect the people with whom you come in contact. But our concern is for more than just those with whom we interact. Giving tzedekah gives us the ability to make an even greater difference in the lives of others by extending our reach beyond our immediate surroundings. It gives us the chance to touch people we may never meet, and have a greater impact on our world.

How we spend our resources is a reflection of our values. What we do with our money is critical and makes a statement about our priorities. I remember how I felt when I saw a portion of the final episode of last year's hit TV show, *The Apprentice*. It had something to do with putting on some kind of charity fundraiser, and Donald Trump announced on stage, that he himself was kicking in \$ 25,000. \$ 25,000 is a nice chunk of change, and I don't know how much he gives away, but for someone who purports to be as wealthy as Donald Trump, the figure seemed rather paltry. It reminded me of the scene in *Austin Powers*, when Dr. Evil threatens to destroy the world if his supposedly outrageous ransom demand is not met – of one million dollars.

We have an obligation to share with others and to insure that we allocate some of our resources so that our values live on, through support of the synagogue, Federation, Israel, and other worthy and important Jewish institutions. We are guided by the principle that

we should not just spend on ourselves. All that we have is but lent to us by God, and what we do with it is a sign of our character and the kind of people we are.

Is it any coincidence that in Pirke Avot, we are told that *keter shem tov*, the crown of a good name is the most superior of all the crowns we can attain.

I have always been moved and touched by an interesting story in the midrash. It tells us that at the very moment when Joseph almost succumbed to the temptations of the temptress, Potiphar's wife in Egypt, he suddenly saw an apparition of his father Jacob, and found the strength to resist her overtures. Even though he had not seen his father for many years, Joseph recalled his father's expectations and teachings. They were the source of his ethics and actions and compelled him to ultimately do the right thing. Jacob may have had many shortcomings, but he was successful as a father at that moment.

As a father, like our patriarch Jacob, I want my children to carry with them what it is I have tried to teach them over the years. Know that a full and meaningful life comes from satisfaction in your work, in the company of friends, family and relationships, by having fun, through laughter, humor, education, and concern for others, not material excess.

Not too long ago, it was raining outside, and I noticed that you, son, were polishing your shoes, almost instinctively. I asked you about it, and you said that it was because when you were in the army, the soldiers would always polish the shoes before it would rain to help the rain roll off and keep them dry. I suggested you might want to continue to do this, almost make it a custom or ritual so that you would always remember those days and of your willingness to serve and sacrifice on behalf of your people, and that there are others still doing so.

Never forget dear children, you are part of a community, and part of a people. You have a responsibility to that people and to its survival, and an obligation to live by its moral code. Keep in mind that how you go about pursuing your livelihood, what you do with the resources you will be fortunate enough to acquire, and striving for balance are matters where the insights and wisdom of Judaism has so much to offer. By taking this message to heart, may you come to know true blessing, happiness and fulfillment. And then you will be wealthy, truly wealthy, in every sense of the word.

Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
Congregation B'nai Tzedek
Potomac, Maryland
September 25, 2004
potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org