

Heroes: They Don't Make Them Like They Used To

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Our tradition views living modestly, within our means as a virtue, and gives us the tools to follow this approach in death as well as in life. Repulsed by the excesses and extravagant funerals of the wealthy, Rabban Gamliel decreed in the second century that he be buried in a simple fashion. As a result, to this day, most know that Judaism mandates a "plain pine box" for funerals. In part this is because we believe that our soul is immortal and that it is our deeds and the good we do that lives on beyond the grave.

In stark contrast to this approach, in April of this year, in their words, "to be sure they would not be forgotten," Ed and Nancy Peck of New York built a \$ 400,000 mausoleum to house their remains.

If it was immortality they really wanted, they could have built a school, endowed a scholarship program, contributed to their house of worship or community center with that \$ 400,000. Not to be forgotten? They could have had a plaque, sign or some kind of recognition that would say, "Made possible through the generous contribution of ..." I know of one very deserving synagogue in Maryland that would have been happy to come up with a number of creative and productive ways to use the donation.

They are not the only ones to show poor judgment in deciding what to do once they were gone. Another example of resources that could surely have been put to better use is Leona Helmsley's decision to leave \$ 12 million in her will for the care of her dog.

Although this may sound like the introduction to a sermon kicking off an endowment fund, it is not. Rather, this is the time of year to focus on what truly counts, what we value, what is our legacy, and how it is we wish to be remembered. This is why today is called Yom HaZikaron, the Day of Remembrance. God remembers our deeds, and we are called to make an accounting of our lives and our actions. The prayers summon us to reflect on these themes so that we will heed the call to better ourselves and hear the call to reflect on our values. We are urged to consider how to spend our most precious resources: time and money, for it reveals a great deal about our values and what matters to us.

Where we put our resources, who are our heroes, and what is the nature of the accomplishments of those who garner and attract our interest reflect our society and our personal values. Living in an era which celebrates vanity and fame, we shower attention upon too many shallow individuals who are unappreciative and undeserving of our adulation, who do not care about those who make them what they are.

As Tom Shales wrote in the Washington Post this past July, "People can be famous for being famous, famous for being infamous, famous for having once been famous, and, thanks largely to the Internet, famous for not being famous at all."

Could he be referring to the triumvirate of Britney Spears, Lindsay Lohan and Paris Hilton. Can someone please tell me -- what is it about these three girls in their 20's that is so fascinating that they warrant so much media attention?

As they recklessly drift into and out of prison, relationships, rehab, restaurants, and nightclubs, their every move and rendezvous is recorded and reported, as if it matters.

Unfortunately the conduct of some of our public officials is equally unbecoming their positions. The hypocrisy of elected officials in whom we place our trust and the disgrace and shame so many have brought on their office is disturbing. We continue to read troubling stories about priests and other religious leaders whose behavior is the antithesis of what they preach and teach.

Perhaps we should turn instead to an old standby, the sports world to find heroes deserving of our praise. But there we have an NBA referee who admitted to using inside information to predict the winners of NBA basketball games and of passing on his picks to a professional gambler in return for cash. The public struggles with mixed feelings about a baseball player whose record-breaking achievements are eclipsed by suspicions of steroid use, prompted in part because his triceps are about 4 times larger now than they were a few years ago. Or there is the case of the football player with a great deal of talent and potential who was involved in barbaric and cruel mistreatment of animals. It has gotten to the point where watching an NFL game is like watching 3 ½ hours of "America's Most Wanted."

A cynical public may ask, "Where have you gone Joe DiMaggio?" Is there nowhere to turn, and no one to look to as upholding positive values we would want to have as role models for ourselves and our children?

Do not despair, for this morning, on this Yom HaDin, Day of Judgment, when we want to align ourselves with the morals we should strive to live by, there are a few examples of individuals who are successful, but more importantly who are good and decent people and who can inspire us by the way they live their lives.

This past summer Cal Ripken, a regular guy who had an extraordinary career was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. His greatest accomplishment might be even more impressive than his statistics, but his qualities and attributes and the kind of person he is.

By all accounts he is modest, gives back to his community, and truly cares about the fans. He doesn't take the admiration for granted. Unlike so many of today's players, he recognizes how important the public is to his success, and that without their support he would be nothing. He is well-known for spending hours before and after games signing autographs for everyone who was waiting for one, long after other players had left the stadium.

I witnessed some of these qualities first hand. A week after being inducted into the Hall of Fame, he went with his wife and daughter to visit a college campus his daughter was interested in attending the same day I happened to be taking a tour with my son, Noam. And wouldn't you know it – he flew back on the same packed, commercial Southwest Airlines plane Noam and I took.

Getting off the plane, I asked him what he thought about the school we had just visited. He politely told me it was too early in the process to make up their minds. The conversation could have ended right there. But the amazing thing is he then proceeded to turn to me and ask me what we thought of it, and where it was on our list. I have met and had conversations with my share of famous people, but it is most unusual for a guy who had just a week before been voted into the Hall of Fame to take an interest in some anonymous fan. (After all, he had no idea who I am. There was no way he could have possibly known how famous I was about to make him by mentioning him in a B'nai Tzedek High Holiday sermon!) He probably would have continued the conversation, except that we were interrupted by a woman in the airport who asked if he would mind having his picture taken with her son, which of course he agreed to do.

His speech at the Hall of Fame is a classic statement of Jewish values. He evinced genuine, sincere modesty. He stated that his Streak of consecutive games paled in comparison to those who do their job day in and day out, and that the teachers, police officers, mothers, fathers and regular people who show up for work everyday are the ones deserving of recognition and praise. I always felt that in some way The Streak was his way of honoring them.

He has lived his whole life by the Torah's injunction, *kaved et aveecha*, honor your father and is the modicum of *derech erez*, respect for other human beings. He told a story in his induction speech he did not need to tell – about a time early in his career when he was thrown out in the first inning for arguing a call. He said that he learned about a family who had saved up to come and see him play and that now they had been denied that opportunity. You had the feeling that after all these years, it still bothered him, and that he wished he could make it up to them. It was as if he was doing *teshuvah*, seeking forgiveness.

In Cooperstown he spoke of the importance of working for *tikun olam*. Ok, so he didn't use those actual words, but he did speak about the need to work to make the world a better place and the importance of giving back.

This is the kind of person whose values are consistent with all that our tradition embraces, and whose humility and accomplishments in the game of life can inspire and teach all of us a great deal.

I recently read an interesting biography about someone else whose morals are worthy of praise. It was called [The Life and Times of Johnny Unitas](#). It wasn't until I read a fascinating review of the book by George Weigel, of the Ethics and Public Policy Center

in of all places, Commentary magazine that I realized how much there was to learn from the book.

The point Weigel makes in his article, which incidentally, I had each of my children read, was that the game, like the world has evolved considerably in the last few decades. There is no room for personal initiative in today's corporate NFL system. All the headsets, camera angles, coaches, assistant coaches, assistants to the assistant coaches do not allow for individual initiative. As a result, accountability and personal responsibility are absent. This is true not just in the game of football, but in our world today as well.

Unlike today's system, Unitas had full control of the offensive game. One time an offensive coach, Don McCafferty tried to give Unitas some advice about what to do. The quarterback told him something that would be inconceivable today. He replied, "Mac, unless you're absolutely positive they're going to blitz, let me know. Otherwise, sit back, relax, and enjoy the game."

His story is a great one. Turned down by Notre Dame, he went to the University of Louisville, and was drafted in the ninth round by the Pittsburgh Steelers, who cut him at the end of the pre-season. Until he was picked up by the Baltimore Colts, he was playing sandlot football for \$ 6 per game. His first pass in the NFL was an interception, which was returned for a touchdown. With selfless determination and hard work, he persevered and did not give up, going on to become the greatest quarterback to ever play the game.

He was respected by his teammates for his grit and ability to play even when hurt, and he brought out the best in them. He passed up numerous opportunities to outshine others and did not seek individual glory. After winning the 1959 championship in what is referred to as "the greatest game ever played", he passed on the opportunity to go on the Ed Sullivan show. He said one of the other guys needed the money more and that he wanted to go back to Baltimore on the bus with the rest of the team.

He took responsibility for his actions and whatever happened on his watch. A teammate related how one time he chewed out a receiver for not running the right pattern resulting in Unitas' pass being intercepted. When asked in the locker room what happened, Unitas said, "It was my fault. I overthrew the intended receiver." Can you imagine one of today's players responding with such graciousness and equanimity?

Another time, a player came back to the huddle, what some called "Unitas' Cathedral" and reported that a guy on the other team had called him the "N-word." The very next play, Unitas drilled a bullet pass at the head of the offending player, knocking him on the ground. No wonder John Mackey said, when you were in the huddle with Unitas, you felt you were in the huddle with God.

Reading about this bygone era, you cannot help but miss what was a simpler, and in some respects better time. It was a time when, as recounted in the book, if a player needed help painting his home, his teammates would all show up and help out. Sadly, that sense of cooperation, unity of purpose and of community is less apparent not just among NFL

players today, but in society as a whole. If only we could find a way to recapture some of that spirit, we would be much better off.

It was recently discovered that one of the greatest religious leaders of our time, Mother Teresa kept a private diary which expressed her spiritual misgivings and questioning her faith. Some have been stunned to read the depth of her doubt. In one passage she wrote: “Lord, my God, who am I that you should forsake me? The child of your love... and now become as the one You have thrown away as unwanted, unloved...I am told God loves me, and yet the reality of darkness.. is so great that nothing touches my soul.”

My response to reading that some were upset by her inner struggles was that anyone who was alarmed by what she writes has obviously never read the Book of Psalms, where similar thoughts of abandonment are expressed.

The important thing is what she did despite her despair. A constantly cheerful woman who was also smiling, her misery should inspire us to realize as Michael Gerson wrote, “holiness has more to do with obedience than spiritual feelings; that faith can coexist with suffering and doubt.” The point is that despite her personal misgivings, she persevered, again a lesson for all of us.

So as we enter these upcoming Days of Repentance and Days of Awe, let us reflect on who we admire, and who our heroes are, for it says something about us. Let us think and speak with our families about the values we want to see endure and how we would want to be remembered. Our liturgy at this time of year reinforces the belief that what do we do with our lives matters, and that the choices we make are important.

Pirke Avot, the Sayings of the Sages tells us to remember where we come from, and where we are going. It is good advice, for it gives us a sense of humility and purpose. This day of introspection affords us the opportunity to realize that we will each be judged one day, based on how we live our lives. The monuments we build that are most lasting are not mausoleums, but the way we touch others. The Talmud says that the most prominent and noteworthy characteristic of Jews is our kindness and compassion. This is what we should keep in mind today, this Day of Remembrance. We implore God, “*zochreinu lechayim, melech hafetz bechayim*: Remember us unto Life, O King who delights in life.” In turn we should think of remembering how we should conduct our lives and of the legacy we leave behind.

I want to conclude with a story about a dinner party in which the CEO of a large corporation who was rather full of himself spoke about the problem with education. For him, life and success was all about the bottom line, profits and dollars and cents. In a loud voice he said, “What’s a kid going to learn from someone who decided his best option was to become a teacher. As they say, ‘those who can, do. Those who can’t, teach.’”

He turned to one of the guests, and as if to prove his point, said, “Bonnie, You’re a teacher. Be honest. What do you make?”

Bonnie paused for a moment and then replied, “You want to know what I make? I make kids work harder than they ever thought they could. I make a C+ feel like he had just won the Congressional Medal of Honor. I make kids sit through 40 minutes of class time, when their parents can’t make them sit for five minutes without an I-Pod, game cube or dvd. You really want to know what I make?” she continued, without waiting for a response.

“I make kids wonder. I make them confident and I make them learn to ask questions. I make them think critically and criticize respectfully. I make them apologize and mean it. I make them have respect and take responsibility for their actions. I teach them to write and then I make them write. I make them read, read and read some more. I make them show all their work in math. I make my students from other countries learn everything they need to know in English, while preserving their unique cultural identity. I make my classroom a place where all my students feel safe. I make my students stand to say the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag, because we live in the United States of America. Finally, I make them understand that if they use the gifts they were given, work hard, and follow their hearts, they can succeed in life.

Turning to the man who initiated the conversation she said, “I guess you can say if you want to know what I make: I make a difference”, and concluded, “Tell me sir, what do you make?”

On this day when we think about our lives, may we each use our time and resources wisely. May we make good use of them and may we make good choices.

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