

## A Father's Day Message

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It is tough being a hero these days. It is tough to be a professional athlete as well.

When I was growing up, people who played sports had to work in the off-season. Difficult as it may be to believe, I actually remember when football and baseball players would work in the off-season selling cars or insurance, or taking other odd jobs to make ends meet. Players stayed with the same team throughout their entire career, and were actually a part of the community. They lived in the city they played for. And in the long-gone idyllic era I am nostalgically remembering, players did not question or challenge their coaches, or at least they appeared not to do so.

Somewhere over the years, things changed. With the advent of free agency, athletes became so well paid it was not necessary for them to work or live in the community where they played. They became highly paid and pampered individuals. Some hire an entourage to accompany and protect them when they go out. The athlete today who enlists in the Army, or who takes time out of his career to serve his country is the exception, not the rule, as it once was.

All of which brings me to the topic at hand, a serious issue facing the citizens of the nation's capital. As we consider what to do about the crisis in Syria, and whether or not military aid to the rebels should be offered; as we debate the merits of health care for our nation and the best way to assist the least fortunate in our society; as we debate how to revamp and revise our immigration policy; and as people line up on both sides of the privacy vs. security debate, secrecy vs. the government's obligation to protect its citizens and ponder the morality of leaking sensitive information, the thing that really captivates and animates our discussions in Washington, D.C. and environs, and which everyone has an opinion on is ---

Should RG III be throwing more and running less?

And the corollary to this important topic of whether he should scramble less and throw more is --- who knows best: the coach or the player? Who should make that decision, the coach or the player? And the real issue I want to raise this morning, this day before Father's Day is -- who knows best and who should decide what is best for the team and the individual: the coach or the player's father?

For those of you who may not know what I am talking about, RG III is the nickname of Robert Griffin III, the talented, promising new quarterback for the Washington Redskins. Last year, his first as a pro, he had a great year and was named Rookie of the Year. He lifted the hapless Redskins and gave their fans hope that the team would finally be worth watching. But in the playoff game which the Redskins lost, ending their season, he injured his knee, and was visibly in pain. It was painful to watch, as his right knee gave out.

Monday morning quarterbacks questioned whether or not Redskins coach Mike Shanahan should have taken him out of the game earlier, instead of keeping him in the game after his right knee was so obviously injured, and he was having trouble walking and standing up.

But the aspect of the story that interests me the most was that a little less than a month ago, Robert Griffin Jr., as in RG II, the father of said player, who raised his son, and who helped to make him not only a fine ball player, but also who helped to make him the fine young man that he is, made his

opinion on the matter well known. In a very public manner he told reporters what he thought. "...Based on what I know Robert can do, he doesn't have to be a runner as much as last year....I'm his dad. I want him throwing that football a lot. A lot."

Just when the player and the coach had reached an understanding, had hashed everything out and buried any ill feelings there may have been, just when they had achieved *shalom bayit*, peace between them, RG III's father speaks out, and scolds the coach for how his son was being treated.

What is a son to do? What is a player to do? What would you do? How would you respond if caught in the middle like this? In this kind of situation kids sometimes will say one word. "Awkward."

Robert Griffin III responded in a way that can teach all of us. I love what he said and how he handled the thorny situation. When asked by reporters to comment on his father's intervention and his expressing doubts about the coaching decisions of the Redskins, the football player's comments blew me away. The young 23 year old superstar thrust in the limelight said, "I don't have a leash on my parents. I love my dad. I talked to him after I heard what he said, and I told him. 'Thank you.' That's what he's supposed to say as my father. Yeah, he doesn't want to see me running out there. He wants to see me throwing the ball that's what he taught me to do....I was just so proud of the fact that he stood up and said something."

Somehow, somewhere along the line, in between his workouts and training, his college studies and preparing to be a professional athlete, RG III learned Torah. Not only did he learn Torah, he must have studied Gemorrah, the Talmud as well.

As we all know, the fifth of the Ten Commandments says to honor your father and mother. The Talmud elaborates. In *Massechet Kiddushin* 31b, it teaches that a child may not contradict his parent's words. The commentaries explain this means that a child should never dispute what a parent says, especially not in public, the only exception being if a parent tells a child to violate a law of the Torah.

A close reading of the Torah reveals that it does not command us to love our parents. We are commanded to honor and respect them.

Respect for parents is shown, according to Jewish teachings, by how one speaks to one's parents, and how one speaks about one's parents. We are taught to never humiliate them, or put them down. If your parent says something and you know it is wrong, you either say nothing, or privately point it out, never in front of others, and gently, as a question, so the father will realize his mistake. The Talmud says you should say, "Father, isn't it taught that such and such ..." so that parent will realize his mistake on his own and not be embarrassed.

It is not enough for a child to care for his parents, he must treat them with dignity, because it is not just what you do for them, but how you do it and how you treat them that is important. This is why the Talmud tells the story of a man who gives his elderly father plenty to eat, but speaks to him with contempt and scorn. The child who does less, but who does so with love, tenderness, compassion and concern is more virtuous.

When a child recites the *birkat hamazon*, the blessing after eating a meal in the presence of his or her parents, he or she says, "*Avi mori*, my father, my teacher, or *imi morati*, my mother, my teacher." These are among the most endearing words of respect a child can utter. It acknowledges the role

our parents play as mentors, as advisers, as providers, as individuals who teach and guide us and who prepare us for life's journey.

The commandment to honor your father and mother is one of the few for which the Torah promises a reward, "so that your days may long endure." For the mitzvah of honoring his father and showing all of us how to show respect for our parents, and how to honor them, we pray, to paraphrase the Torah: May RG III's days, his *playing* days long endure, and that his knees not give out.

Happy Father's Day to all.

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