

Dreams Fulfilled, Dreams Denied: Life's Hard Knocks

Before the big battle, the men gathered around to hear a series of pep talks. First, a religious leader gave them a blessing and urged them to rise above fear and doubt. Then the leader came and whittled down the squad so that only the bravest, the fittest, and the most focused would be selected to enter the fray.

Yes, the 100th season of the NFL began last night and two of the league's oldest and most storied franchises met. And you can be assured that both teams, the Green Bay Packers and the Chicago Bears, followed the same pre-game script in the locker room: Exhortations from a religious leader, final team instructions from offensive and defensive coaches and coordinators, and then the ultimate decisions and calls from the head coach.

And the formula they all followed was crafted well-over 3,000 years ago and recorded in the Torah. Check out the following from this week's Torah portion, *Shoftim*, Judges, with its instructions on how to select the best squad of men:

² Before you join battle, the *Kohein*, the Priest shall come forward and address the troops.

³ He shall say to them, "Hear, O Israel! You are about to join battle with your enemy. Let not your courage falter. Do not be in fear, or in panic, or in dread of them.

⁴ For it is the Eternal your God who marches with you to do battle for you against your enemy, to bring you victory."

⁵ Then the officials shall address the troops, as follows: "Is there anyone who has built a new house but has not dedicated it? Let him go back to his home, lest he die in battle and another dedicate it.

⁶ Is there anyone who has planted a vineyard but has never harvested it? Let him go back to his home, lest he die in battle and another harvest it.

⁷ Is there anyone who has paid the bride-price for a wife, but who has not yet married her? Let him go back to his home, lest he die in battle and another marry her."

⁸ The officials shall go on addressing the troops and say, "Is there anyone afraid and disheartened? Let him go back to his home, lest the courage of his comrades flag like his."

⁹ When the officials have finished addressing the troops, army commanders shall assume command of the troops. (Deuteronomy 20:1-9)

The Torah instructed the leaders to choose only those troops with the greatest of skills and the sharpest focus. Anyone distracted would be a detriment to the squad. They had to be sent home.

Later in the Hebrew Bible, the *Shofet*-Judge Gideon added yet another way to whittle down his troops so that only the bravest and readiest would go into battle. He took his troops down to the water. He then took note of how they quenched their thirst. Some got down on their hands and knees in order to drink. Others crouched down to drink by lapping up the water like dogs. He took only those who lapped the water like dogs, because they were able to keep their weapons poised and ready. Those who went down on their hands and knees had to lay their weapons down or fully sheathe them. By doing so, they made themselves vulnerable. In this way, Gideon was able to select only the best of the men with whom to go to battle. Of course, those who were selected were filled with pride. After months of preparation and endless drills, they were among the chosen cohort who would represent the nation. They put on the glorious colors and marched off in parade to the cheers of the crowd.

Meanwhile, those who were sent home felt the sting of rejection. Months earlier they left home with great expectations and dreams of glory. Friends and family rallied around them, building up their esteem and fortifying their courage. Their parents cried nervous tears, but their faces glowed with pride. Sweethearts sent the young men off with hugs and quick kisses of encouragement to come home safe and victorious.

But now, those who were rejected had to slink back home, head bowed, hoping to meld back into the crowd without being noticed. Yes, maybe next time they'd be selected. But for now, they were cut and sent home. There was no parade and no fanfare for those who did not make the grade.

A version of this human story has been broadcast on HBO's excellent football series, *Hard Knocks*. For the past 14 years, viewers have been taken in to the locker rooms of a particular team to witness the pre-season practices, meetings, drama, and games. Over a course of 5-weeks, we watch how 90-plus athletes are put through the ropes, tested, evaluated and then whittled down to the team's final 53. Most of these players have practiced from the middle of spring. OTAs (Organized Team Activities) began this year on May 15. All through the summer the players sweated and fought, ran countless drills and tried their best to memorize volumes of plays and schemes. The coaches had some pretty tough decisions: who was the most fit, who showed the most promise, who filled the needs of the team, who was injured, who was conflict prone in the locker-room, and who showed up with frost-bitten feet and threw a hissy-fit about his helmet?

The final cuts were just last week. In one fell swoop, around 1,000 players on the 32 NFL teams were sent home, their dreams of stardom denied---or at the very least delayed. To even get to the level where you are invited to an NFL team's camp is a tremendous achievement. Consider all the hundreds of thousands of players in youth football leagues. Only the best of those went on to play for their high school teams. Those boys practice and lift weights all year round. They endure some out-of-control coaches (and parents), are blessed and inspired by many other fabulous coaches and parents, make great friends, and too often suffer life-long injuries from the experience. And the best of those best go on to play college football. Nearly every college, large and small, has a football team. The major colleges have teams of 60 to 70 players or more. There are over 750 colleges with football teams, so around 37,000 college kids are able to fulfill their dream and play collegiate football. Many, but not all, are on scholarship. Indeed, most do not receive a full scholarship. For four years, they play their hearts out, practice all year long, and are battered and bruised by the pounding of ever bigger, faster, and stronger opponents. Of all those players, only a tiny fraction are invited to a NFL training camp. Even the top 250 college players who are drafted have a hard time making a team. Usually, only the players in the top four or five rounds have a good chance. And so it is, after spending most of their lives honing their bodies and skills to fulfill their ultimate dream to play in the NFL, the vast majority are sent home. Some of those who did not make the cut one year try and try again. They nurse injuries, endure torturous rehab and give it one more shot and then another until, finally, a coach or a loved one convinces them that their dream is over.

Over the course of a typical Hard Knocks series, you get to know some very compelling and likable young men. You meet their families: loving and supportive girlfriends or wives; adorable kids and the moms and dads who have been with these players on every step of their journey. When the player misses a tackle, drops the ball or over-throws a pass, we see the pain on the faces of their families. We see them wince when their loved one stumbles, and they leap and roar with joy at every good play. You get to like these young players and root for them. And on that last episode when we watch so many of them escorted in to the coach's office, our hearts sink along with them. Playbooks and fobs are turned in. Uniforms are piled into laundry bags and names are scraped off of lockers. Off they trudge---to an uncertain future. Meanwhile, many of our favorites either make the team or are picked up by another team after the final cuts. Sighs and shouts of pure relief release the built up stress and pressure. They made it! They made it---at least for now.

Dreams fulfilled. Dreams denied. The hard knocks of life are not just the stuff of athletes and wannabe superstars. Rather, we see those stories played out in every life. Our dreams and aspirations do not always come true. Our hopes and our great expectations are sometimes just a little beyond us. Our society is a competitive meritocracy. The push for excellence begins at an early age and along the way, we learn that it's okay to have many different kinds of dreams. Our goals and aspirations can change. We begin to value different achievements. We learn that there are eternal values that transcend the marketplace and the winner's circle. We discover that having a loving family, loyal friends, and a spiritual appreciation of

God's gift of life are far more valuable than trophies and ribbons. Athletic and intellectual and social and financial achievements need to be understood in a bigger and grander context. As it is written in the *Mishneh, Pirkei Avot (4:1)*:

And who is wise? The one who learns from everyone.

And who is mighty? One who controls one's urges.

And who is rich? One who is happy and grateful for what one has.

Yes, life's hard knocks make every journey a challenge. But they also strengthen us. They toughen us. We learn to pick ourselves up after we have been knocked down. And most important: we learn that we are more than just the dreams we've fantasized. Our character and our values and the love we create elevate each one of us. Let us cherish and treasure our ultimate victories---the achievements of love, friendship, thoughtfulness, patience, and a nurturing, joyful spirit that we can demonstrate every day. And these greatest of all accolades are well within the reach of each and every one of us. Everyone can make the team of greatest importance --- simply by being a *mensch!*

Knock if you're with me!