

True Grit: A Formula For Success

The late, former Israeli Prime Minister, Shimon Peres said,

Look, we [the Jewish people] have existed for 4,000 years - 2,000 years in diaspora, in exile. Nobody in the Middle East speaks their original language but Israel. When we started 66 years ago, we were 650,000 people. So, you know, we are maybe swimming a little bit against the stream, but we continue to swim.

He found it inspirational that against all odds, our Jewish ancestors persevered. Against all odds, the nation of Israel was born. Peres then turned that historical lesson into a personal motto. As he taught:

The most important thing in life is to dare. The most complicated thing in life is to be afraid. The smartest thing in the world is to try to be a moral person.

That's sage advice from the one of Israel's founding fathers: Find the inner strength to believe in yourself and your life's mission. Dare to believe. Don't let fear overwhelm you. And, above all, be a moral and good person.

Of course, having good advice from parents and grandparents, mentors and teachers, experienced colleagues and peers is one thing. Actually listening to it and following up on it, is quite another.

I've heard the following anecdote told in various forms by a great number of parents and grandparents. It goes something like this: "When my children were young, they thought that I was the smartest person alive. By the time they were in high school, they thought that I was absolutely clueless. When they were in college they were convinced that I was hopelessly ignorant. But when they graduated and tried to start their careers, all of sudden, I became a genius again!"

So the good news is that the younger generation will gain a greater sense of appreciation and admiration for their parents and grandparents who were able to find a career, establish a family, and provide for their loved ones.

The bad news is that they want to move back home! Indeed, the most recent studies show that for the first time since 1880, young adults ages 18 to 34 are more likely to live with a parent than in any other arrangement.

Yes, the younger generations are facing new and very difficult challenges.

Therefore, this is not a time to be judgmental and critical. Rather, this is the time for us to explore ways in which we can be helpful and supportive.

This morning of Yom Kippur, we read in the Torah:

⁹ You stand this day, all of you, before Adonai your God -- your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, every man, woman and child of

Israel; even the stranger within your camp, I make this covenant, with those who are standing here with us this day before Adonai our God and with those who are not with us here this day. (Deuteronomy 29)

One of the core values of Judaism is the understanding that we have an absolute responsibility to prepare the younger generations for the unique challenges that they and only they will face. We know that the future of our Jewish family is dependent on their success. Of course, “success” can mean different things to different people. Some claim that the ideals of success vary depending on one’s generation. That may or not be so. And yet, regardless as to how an individual in one generation or another defines success, the question remains: How does one achieve his or her goals?

An interesting proposal has been put forth by Dr. Angela Duckworth, a MacArthur Fellow and celebrated author and psychologist. It is a proposal that has caused quite a stir in the fields of education and sociology. Dr. Duckworth’s research has demonstrated that the most successful students are not those with the highest IQs. It has long puzzled researchers why there is often disconnect between those who learn quickly and easily and those who succeed at school, business, and relationships. Her quest to find

the reason for that disconnect has led her to a startling conclusion: the determining factor for success is not, as might be commonly assumed, IQ, inherited wealth, physical attributes, or social opportunities. Yes, each of those can add positively to a person's progress. But the primary determiner for success is, what she calls "grit." Grit, as she defines it, is the passion and perseverance to achieve long term goals. Again, grit is the passion and the perseverance to achieve long term goals. Grit is that which keeps a person going, fighting and striving regardless of the hurdles and setbacks. Grit is that determination not to quit.

Like so many logical messages, if you read one of Dr. Duckworth's articles or listen to her TED lecture, it is easy to see the wisdom. Well, of course, if one has grit, if one refuses to quit, more often than not they will succeed. The challenge is in taking that advice, absorbing that wisdom, and acting on it. In addition to the challenge of identifying good and constructive advice, we are also confronted with the question: "How does one develop "grit?"

The Torah gives each parent and grandparent an important mitzvah:

"V'shinantam l'vanekhah, teach your children." Yes, teach them words of

Torah and arrange for them to explore the wisdom and inspiration of Judaism. It also means that we need to teach our children survival skills, street smarts, and that determination to persevere through setbacks. Have we taken the time to share with them that we, too, were scared and unsure when we were just out of school or just starting a job or just falling in love? We, too, had the panic attacks and moments of doubt as it suddenly dawned on us that we didn't have a clue as we were about to get married or just about to start a family or struggling how to make a living.

V'shinantam l'vanekhah, teach your children.

Do they know, have we taught them the difference between lust, infatuation, love, and the kind of LOVE that one feels when you can't fathom going on your life's journey without that person in your life?

Do they know, have we taught them that yes, we also struggled to find the right career path? A generation ago, the average adult counted 3-6 jobs along their career path. Modern adults often double that number. It's irrelevant to label that phenomenon good or bad. It is simply the modern reality. Jobs come and go. Opportunities arise and one either jumps to take advantage of them or not. The key is: do we provide our children and grandchildren a safe and creative sounding board for them to brainstorm?

Again, that is a far cry from telling them what you think they should do. Rather, a brainstorming session allows us to consider new possibilities, gain perspective and sharpen our analytic skills. *V'shinantam I'vanekhah, teach your children:*

Do they know, have we taught them our knowledge and experiences of best business practices, professionalism and work ethic? If you have held a job, hired others for a job, fired others from a job, we need to teach our children and grandchildren the characteristics and habits for success.

Teach them how to respond to a boss. Teach them how to address a client.

Teach them how go the extra mile so that the company or firm values them.

Teach them how to muster through exhaustion and stress in order to complete an important task. Jobs are by nature hard. That's why they're called jobs. We need to help our kids acquire the best practices for the workplace.

Do they know, have we taught them, have we demonstrated for them, how to listen, to hear not just the words but also to note the feelings behind the words; to hear concerns and not get defensive; to deeply listen before processing a response?

Do they know, have we taught them how to win with grace, how to lose with grace, how to learn from failure?

And finally, do they know, have we taught them how to persevere, how to overcome failure and disappointment and the occasional unfairness of life? Have we taught them how to develop grit?

As I mentioned earlier, Dr. Duckworth's research points to grit as the number one quality determining success. And while at first glance it may seem all but impossible to teach, I believe that we need only to point to the heroic history of our people.

Of all the extraordinary gifts of the Jewish people, at the core is our legendary tenacity, our will to survive, to thrive, to create, and to improve ourselves and the world around us. The history of our people provides endless examples of our indomitable will. We learned how to survive and persevere because we believed that life, progress and the continuing legacy of our family, our faith and our spirit was worth it. The Jewish people have witnessed the rise and fall of countless nations and cultures. The empires of the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Hittites, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, the early Islamic imperialists, the Crusaders, the Mongol invasions, the Ottoman Empire, and the German

Nazi threat all dominated vast parts of the world, all brought oppression and bigotry to Jews. That we survived is a miracle which baffles historians and anthropologists. So many other cultures and tribes have disappeared. Why did the Jews survive?

From defeat to exile to persecuted minorities forced into ghettos and denied the most basic and fundamental rights in both Christian Europe and the Muslim Middle-East, how did we survive? And not just survive. Indeed, how did we get to this moment, *lazman ha-zeh*, this point in the history of civilization, where Jews have had such success and achievements well out of portion to our population? The statistics are relatively well-known but still remarkable. Though Jews currently make up only 0.2% of the world's population at least 22% of all the Nobel Prize winners are Jews and those of Jewish ancestry. We constitute 36% of all the prize winners from the United States. In the scientific research fields of Chemistry, Economics, Physics, and Physiology/Medicine, 26% of the recipients were Jewish. Of the organizations that were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, 22% were founded principally by Jews. And lest you think that those numbers are inflated only due to the greatness of past generations, since the turn of the century (i.e., since the year 2000), Jews have been awarded 25% of all

Nobel Prizes and 28% of those in the scientific research fields. In just about every field of human achievement, medicine, science, business, education, law, and entertainment, a significant percentage of the top leaders are Jewish.

Scholars speculate as to the reason why. Certainly our emphasis on higher education and literacy plays a huge part. Let's face it, Jewish kids begin their teenage years learning how to lead a Shabbat service. They read from a *Sefer Torah* and deliver a thoughtful lesson to peers and adults. Our love of learning, critical analysis and debate have been honed and nurtured for thousands of years. Jews are also instinctively iconoclastic, challenging old assumptions and popular myths. Surely, all of these cultural and spiritual legacies play a significant role in the remarkable achievements of our people. But none of those characteristics would be sufficient if it were not for a strong will-power to carry on, to persevere, and to fight through adversity and setback. You need grit to survive. You need grit to succeed. And this absolute determination to live, to grow, to experience and embrace life is at the very heart of what it means to be a Jew.

This grit, this determination, this preparation for excellence rests on the foundation of Judaism's three pillars: **God, Torah** and **Israel**, or if you will: Spiritual Strength, Wisdom, and a Love of family and community. Spiritual Strength is the realization that life is not defined or confined by the empirical. We are more than flesh and blood. There is intrinsic and exalted purpose, meaning and value to life. Torah can be understood in the broader sense as Wisdom. In the Talmud, Wisdom includes those skills that enhance and enrich ones' life. This includes an appreciation for critical analysis and the search for truth. It also includes such life-saving skills as proper hygiene and teaching our children how to swim. Wisdom, at its essence, is the street-smarts to survive. And, Israel, the final pillar of the triumvirate, means both Israel the people and Israel the land. We fulfill this by teaching our children and grandchildren about the heroic story of their ancestors, the tenacity and courage of their Jewish family, the nurturing warmth of our Jewish community. It means that we form synagogues and organizations to help each other. As it is written in the Talmud (Shevuot 39a), *Kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh, All the people of Israel are responsible for one another.*

The secret of our survival and the tremendous success of our people is not so secret. It is well known. Success is not a mystical gift. Neither is the continued success and survival of our Jewish family to be taken for granted. Rather, our survival and continuing success has to be earned through a commitment to learn, teach and engage the Jewish gifts of spirit, of mind and of the heart. Success is achieved by a determination not to quit when things get rough. A hundred generations of our people have embraced and lovingly taught and nurtured these exalted qualities in the home and the synagogue. Now it is our turn!

In this New Year 5777, let us renew our commitment to teach life's lessons to our children and grandchildren. Teach them about the history and the tenacity of our Jewish people and your personal family's journey. Inspire in them the life lessons that will help them navigate through difficult times. Nurture them and help them strengthen their skills and determination and passion for life. They are our future. Let us help them make that future bright and good.